THE FIGHTING SUDANESE

1954

H. C. JACKSON

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THIS book, though brief, is of particular interest now that many Sudanese have voted for unity with Egypt rather than for complete independence or some kind of association with the British Commonwealth of Nations. It should be read by all who would like authoritative information about the real feelings of the majority of the Sudanese.

It is in three parts, each of which emphasises the courage of the Sudanese and their loyalty to the British; but most of it is devoted to an account of the amazing exploits of the Sudanese in the Second World War—a war in which the Egyptians took no part even though the country over which they had long wished to rule was threatened by the armies of Mussolini massed upon the frontiers of the Sudan in Abyssinia and Eritrea.

Whatever the future holds in store for the peoples of this great country, *The Fighting Sudanese* has put on permanent record an account of the days when the Sudanese were proud to fight side by side with their British comrades in arms.

General Platt, who led the British, Indian and Sudanese troops to victory in Abyssinia and Eritrea, has contributed a Foreword.

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THE FIGHTING SUDANESE

BY

H. C. JACKSON

Formerly Governor of the Provinces of Berber and Halfa in the Sudan

WITH A FOREWORD BY

GENERAL SIR WILLIAM PLATT

G.B.E., K.C.B., D.S.O.

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Dedicated to

THE PEOPLES OF THE SUDAN

who Served so faithfully

and Fought so gallantly for the

Freedom of Mankind

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My thanks are due to General Sir William Platt, not only for writing a Foreword but also for reading my MS. and for correcting several inaccuracies (for any that remain I am alone responsible); to Colonel Browne of the Western Arab Corps; to Mr. K. D. D. Henderson of the Sudan Political Service; to Brigadier A. J. Knott and Major Bramwell Withers (at one time O.C. the XIth Sudanese) for much valuable help; to Lord Rennell of Rodd and Messrs. Edward Arnold for permission to quote in Part 2 the poem by Sir J. Rennell Rodd that was first published in *Ballads of the Fleet and other Poems*; to the Editor of *Sudan Notes and Records* for allowing me to make use of the information about the Defence of Nyala, contained in vol. xxv of that publication, and to Mrs. Ruth Hargrave for correcting the proofs. In compiling Part 3 I have been fortunate in having had access to various documents of which some are not readily available to the general public. Among the authorities consulted I have found the following the most valuable:

1. *Sudan Government Publications*

Meadowforce, by Bimbashi A. C. Beaton.
Kassala at War, by B. Kennedy-Cooke, M.C.
The Composite Infantry Battalion of the Eastern Arab Corps, Sudan Defence Force, in the Abyssinian Campaign, by el Miralai G. Gifford Bey.

The Sudan, a Record of Progress, 1898–1947.
The Upper Nile and the War (1940–41), by G. N. I. Morrison.

2. *Other Documents*

Incidents in the War in the Fung, 1940–41. From a talk by J. W. Robertson, M.B.E., at the Cultural Centre, Khartoum. Reprinted from the *Sudan Daily Herald* by Messrs. McCorquodale & Co. (Sudan Ltd.).

Retrospect. Lecture by Lieutenant-General Sir William Platt, K.C.B., D.S.O., at the Cultural Centre, Khartoum, 24 September 1941. Reprinted from the *Sudan Daily Herald* by Messrs. McCorquodale & Co.

Sealed and Delivered, by G. L. Steer.

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The Abyssinian Campaigns: the official story of the conquest of Italian East Africa.

The Lees Knowles Lectures, by General Sir William Platt.

'The Sudan and the Abyssinian Campaign', by K. D. D. Henderson, published in the *Journal of the Royal African Society*, January 1943.

'The Sudan Defence Force goes to War', article by Brigadier A. J. Knott, O.B.E., in the *Royal Engineers' Journal*, vol. lviii, September 1944.

FOREWORD

BY

GENERAL SIR WILLIAM PLATT

Commander Troops in the Sudan and Commandant Sudan Defence Force 1938–41

On 4 July 1940 columns of Italian Infantry, Artillery and Tanks crossed the frontier of Eritrea in a converging attack on Kassala, a small trading town close to the eastern border of the Sudan. There cannot have been less than ten thousand troops under the Italian General.

To resist this onslaught there were three Motor Machine Gun Companies and one Mounted Infantry Company of the Sudan Defence Force, whose heaviest weapons were the ·303 Vickers Machine Gun and the 1938 model of the Anti-Tank Rifle. The strength of these four Companies did not exceed six hundred, led by a sprinkling of British officers.

From dawn to dusk the Italian attackers were supported without break by fighter and bomber aircraft. The nearest British aircraft were active about the Red Sea: not one was in the Kassala sky to gladden the hearts of soldiers sweating in the desert.

True to their training the Sudanese Companies kept continuously on the move, darting in to sting like mechanised mosquitoes and extricating themselves before the Italians could take effective counter-action,

repeating the process swiftly in another place, perhaps minutes, perhaps an hour later.

News of the action filtered in bits to Headquarters in Khartoum across two hundred and fifty miles of flat and open desert. It reached eager and anxious hands by erratic wireless or railway telegraph. Much was vague. Much was out of time. 'Fog' descended.

Demands for an aeroplane to 'Go and Find Out' were frequent. There were only four at call — four Vincents, built about 1928, capable of 100 m.p.h. with the wind and 80 m.p.h., with luck, against. All four might have to go out the next day in the hope that one would get back with news.

This was not the day for sacrifice: but it was the night for speculation. Would the Italians, having nibbled at the crust, embark on a great strategic offensive to fulfil their dream of an All-Green Italian North-East Africa from Tripoli to the Indian Ocean? Or would they content themselves with the gain of a few miles of desert sand, and wireless cackle? And if they came boldly on, would they strike West for the capital of Khartoum, North-West for the railway heart at Atbara, or North for the one and only Port Sudan?

Along a thousand miles of frontier, attacked at Kassala and at Gallabat, actively threatened at other points, there was a thin, very thin, line of Sudanese soldiers, with wide open gaps in which Sudanese police and enthusiastic District Commissioners, with begged and borrowed rifles, played their gallant part.

Behind this fringe there were three Regular English Battalions from Yorkshire, Worcestershire and Essex.

Foreword

For more than two months, until reinforcements began to arrive in August and September, the Sudan was held, and held firm as in a vice, by six thousand Sudanese and two thousand Englishmen, amongst all of whom there was not one tank, not one gun, and precious few automatics.

Have any soldiers in history been tested more severely than those Sudanese? Not since Omdurman had they been engaged by an attacking force. Occasional internal troubles or sporadic tribal revolts had been the summit of their practical experience. They had neither seen nor suffered the horror of modern war. Their name was that of a 'Defence' Force.

Their test came with the invasion of their country, one episode of which is outlined here. That episode was no isolated incident. It is an example that was followed and repeated in style and fashion, in courage and endurance, whenever and wherever the call of battle and of duty sounded. It was their answer on the shore of the Red Sea; among the rocks and spear-grass of the escarpment about Keren and Chilga; on the wet and cold ambas of the Gojjam; in the swamps of the Baro Salient; in the mountains and forests of the near-Equator; and in the plains and jebels close to home.

They stood each test triumphant, earning and deserving the name given to them so justly, and so proudly, by Mr. H. C. Jackson — 'The Fighting Sudanese'.

GRASMERE, *November 1953*

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ANGLO-EGYPTIAN SUDAN (*end of volume*)

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INTRODUCTION

It was my good fortune when I joined the Sudan Civil Service in 1907 to meet many Sudanese who had fought for, or against, the British over a period of some twenty-five years; and many were the talks we had about the old days as we sipped our cups of coffee beside the camp fire. Only nine years had elapsed since the battle of Omdurman on 2 September 1898 and the country was still far from peaceful. Military patrols were a regular feature of the winter months. Armed civil police had constantly to be despatched to deal with some local disturbance. Today when, except for an occasional tribal clash, peace reigns everywhere, it is difficult to realise what a change has come over the Sudan in only half a century.

In Part 1 of *The Fighting Sudanese* — which is really an introduction to the part played by the Sudanese in the Second World War — I have included some stories that have not appeared in print before. These I have collected from eye-witnesses of the events they describe. For others, I am indebted to the late General Sir Reginald Wingate, who so often discussed those distant days with me.

Part 2 is based on articles in *Sudan Notes and Records.*

Part 3 has been compiled from various government documents and other publications.

The Abyssinian Campaigns (the official story of the

conquest of Italian East Africa) has more details about the military exploits of the Sudanese than I have thought proper to mention in this little book; but I do not think it has given sufficient credit to the work of the civil police and the civilian population. I hope that what I have written will make good this defect.

The defence of the Sudan against aggression was a combined operation by soldiers and civilians alike. Private feuds were abandoned for the time being. Nothing was allowed to interfere with a determination to win the war. I like to remember that the Gordon College Graduates' Congress — a society promoted largely to winning independence for the Sudan, and often bitterly critical of the British administration in it — ceased its anti-British propaganda on the outbreak of war and cooperated as loyally as any other section of the community in the fight against a common foe.

This self-restraint at a time when their activities might have been a nuisance, if nothing more, to the government, is a happy omen for the future of the Sudan that those of us who have served in it are just as anxious to see free, happy and prosperous as any of the Sudanese themselves.

H. C. JACKSON

5 BARROW ROAD, CAMBRIDGE,
October 1953

PART 1

Early Days

And dearer yet the brotherhood
That binds the brave of all the earth.

NEWBOLT, *The Island Race*
Clifton College Chapel

THE Sudan is a land of warriors who, as long ago as 750 B.C., exercised dominion over Thebes in Egypt and, a few years later, conquered the whole of Egypt.

Throughout the ages the peoples of the Sudan, as far as our scanty records show, seem to have been constantly at war, though only the visit of an occasional traveller enables us to catch a glimpse of what was happening in that distant land. This perpetual fighting was to prove their undoing, for when, in 1820, Ismail Pasha invaded the Sudan from Egypt, which was then part of the Ottoman Empire, he had little difficulty in overcoming the slight opposition that the disunited tribes could put up against his well-armed forces. For two generations the Sudanese groaned under an administration almost unparalleled for corruption, cruelty and inefficiency until, driven desperate by the atrocities committed upon them, they rose against their oppressors.

In 1881 a holy man, Mohammed Ahmed, with

little but the prestige of his sanctity to back him, collected a few adherents who were determined to put an end to their miseries. Inadequately armed with spears, knives and swords, they routed the Turks and Egyptians in one engagement after another, gathering more supporters as time went on. They killed or captured 20,000 well-armed troops and gained possession of 21,000 rifles as well as 19 guns. On 26 January 1885 Khartoum fell before them, General Gordon was killed, and the Turks and Egyptians were driven from the Sudan.

British troops were sent to Wadi Halfa to protect Egypt from invasion while Sir Evelyn Wood, Lord Wolseley and Sir Herbert Kitchener built up a new Egyptian army to replace that which had been destroyed by the Dervishes. For eleven years the followers of Mohammed Ahmed and of his successor, the Khalifa Abdallahi, were a constant menace to Egypt and, on one occasion, under their leader Abderrahman wad en Nejumi, they even crossed the border.

The story of this abortive attempt to invade Egypt is both a testimony to the devotion of a great leader to the cause he had espoused and to the courage of the Sudanese who followed him into battle.

Abderrahman wad en Nejumi was the greatest of the Dervish Emirs — a skilful strategist, fanatical, fearless. It was he who planned the annihilation of the army of General Hicks, with the loss of 10,000 killed or captured; and some fifteen months after this he played a decisive part in the capture of Khartoum and the death of General Gordon.

He was a firm believer in the divinity of the Mahdi

and served him and the Khalifa Abdallahi faithfully and well. Revered by his followers for his asceticism, loyalty and ability, he was respected by his opponents for his courage and skill, and was a far more capable commander than the better-known Osman Digna, whose frequent tip-and-run skirmishes with British and Imperial troops earned him a notoriety that his military genius did not justify.

Osman Digna's memory might not have lived as long as it did but for the fact that it was his gallant Hadendowa, immortalised as Fuzzy-Wuzzies by Kipling, who broke a British square at Tamai.

To Abderrahman wad en Nejumi was entrusted the task of invading Egypt as a first step towards the conquest of Mecca and the extension of the Khalifa's rule over the inhabited world.

Some time in the early days of 1889 Wad en Nejumi left Omdurman, after burning down his house with a vow that he would never return until he had overrun Egypt, and arrived towards the end of June in the neighbourhood of Wadi Halfa.

The first clash with the troops defending Egypt came on 2 July at Argin, three and a half miles distance from Wadi Halfa. With their customary bravery the Dervishes attacked over and over again, but their spears and their few rifles could do little against the fire of the disciplined troops opposed to them. They were completely routed and left 900 dead upon the field of battle. Some of the survivors deserted, some were captured, and others died in the desert from the wounds they had received. Wad en Nejumi's army was depleted by nearly 2000 men.

The position of the Dervishes was now desperate. They had marched 600 miles from Omdurman and, as their lines of communications increased, so did their means of transport decrease. The horde of invaders, which comprised some 5500 fighting men and 8000 followers, had devoured everything upon their northward march and were reduced to eating the camels, horses and donkeys that alone gave them some chance of returning safely home. By the time they approached the frontiers of Egypt they had left behind them a foodless waste and had another 200 miles or more to go before they could find any food in Egypt. Gunboats patrolled the river and prevented supplies from reaching the starving host that now had nothing to live on except the pounded stones of dates and the fibres of palm trees.

Sir Francis Grenfell, the Sirdar, or Commander-in-Chief of the Egyptian army, in his anxiety to save the lives of the warriors and of their dependents, called upon Wad en Nejumi to surrender, and pointed out the hopelessness of their position, cut off from all food and reinforcements in the wilderness. Wad en Nejumi summoned his Emirs and read out the Sirdar's letter sentence by sentence. It must have been a thrilling scene. Thousands of Dervishes in their patched clothes — a sign of poverty and an emblem of the sacrificial cause to which they were dedicated — and thousands of followers and dependents stood amongst the inhospitable sand-dunes and the barren hillocks — famished, despairing, disillusioned.

The flags of the Dervish Emirs fluttered in the sultry heat of summer, feebly defying the well-armed

forces arrayed against them. Some of the Dervish host wished to escape the inevitable death that awaited them; others doubted if the cause was really worth the sacrifices it entailed. Abderrahman alone remained calm, fearless and unfaltering. As he read out the Sirdar's call to surrender he told the assembled army *that there was little hope of success, and advised all* who were wavering in their allegiance to the forlorn mission to depart. 'I can no longer offer you', he said, 'a prospect of victory; all I can promise you is a martyr's death and life everlasting in the Paradise that awaits you.' Then, waving his sword, he shouted that he would never abandon his holy undertaking. So great was the confidence he inspired that only 500 men left the doomed army. Wad en Nejumi sent back a defiant answer to the Sirdar which ended with the words: 'As regards what you say about the large number of your army, that does not frighten us at all. We are not afraid of anyone; we fear only God.'

Sir Francis Grenfell then decided to attack and on 3 August 1889 the battle was joined at Toski with Wad en Nejumi's last cry, 'Today we must all stand prepared to meet our Maker'.

Wad en Nejumi handled his forces with great skill and determination but the issue was never in doubt. Wad en Nejumi was wounded two or three times and then, when the battle was lost, he tried to make his escape upon a camel. When the fighting was over the British searched the battlefield for any wounded they might be able to help, and came across the body of Wad en Nejumi and, beside the camel that had carried him for the last time, the dead body of one of

his sons, a boy but five years old. Out of his large army that had set out from Omdurman with such high hopes for the invasion of Egypt only 1000 of his fighting men, and perhaps twice as many of the followers, managed to escape. Among the survivors was another of Wad en Nejumi's sons, only a year old, who was brought into the British camp by his nurse on the day after the battle. 'Of all the sons of earth,' says Lord Cromer, 'few can have had their destiny more completely changed by accident than this child. Instead of being brought up to detest Christians amidst savage surroundings in the Sudan he was handed over to the tender care of the English sisters at the principal hospital in Cairo, by whom he was a good deal spoilt, and who were more devoted, and certainly more willing, slaves to him than any of those whom his father could have captured in the centre of Africa.'

How little did Cromer foresee the day when this little child was to become an enemy of the English who had loved, befriended and cared for him as a baby and, when he grew up, obtained for him a commission in the cavalry!

* * *

Only six years had elapsed since Sir Evelyn Wood had been appointed Sirdar of this new Egyptian army and yet, in that short space of time, he had forged a weapon which seven years later was to reconquer the Sudan and destroy the Dervish empire.

Eight battalions of Egyptian *fellahin* were recruited and seven battalions (the IXth to the XVth Sudanese)

of negroes from the southern Sudan who played so prominent a part in the Nile campaign of 1896–8.

Into the details of this campaign it is not my purpose to enter. They have been recorded in the stirring words of Sir Winston Churchill and others. I will confine myself to an account of a few incidents that are not generally known.

If I dwell more upon the exploits of the XIth Sudanese it is not because this battalion was more courageous than others, but because I saw more of them during my service in the Sudan, and discussed with their officers the history of the regiment. There was hardly a battle in the Sudan in which they had not fought, from the siege of Suakin in 1888 to the battle of Omdurman in 1898, and the Jebel Nyima patrol in 1916. At Toski, Tokar, Gemmaiza and Hafir the Dervishes had fled before them, but it was during the Nile campaign that they especially distinguished themselves.

Kitchener's army up the Nile consisted of some 25,000 men of whom approximately one-third were British, one-third Sudanese and one-third Egyptians, but the brunt of the fighting fell on the British and Sudanese, as their casualties testify. At the three main battles of Abu Hamad, the Atbara and Omdurman, the Sudanese lost 74 killed and 496 wounded; the British 54 killed and 448 wounded; and the Egyptians only 6 killed and 61 wounded.

At the battle of the Atbara in April 1898 the XIth Sudanese made a remarkable forced march in which neither a man nor a boy fell out. The battalion was waiting behind the lines when some of the advanced troops, coming under a devastating fire from the

enemy, wavered and began to fall back. With colours flying and the band playing their regimental march the XIth Sudanese moved up to the front line and through it and fell on the Dervishes in their *zariba* and, in spite of heavy casualties, turned the tide of battle. To commemorate their gallantry Lord Grenfell and Kitchener presented them with two special side drums which henceforward they carried proudly on either side of the front line of drums. Kitchener, in a special order of the day, authorised the battalion to wear the Red Hackle, a little plume of scarlet feathers, in honour of their exploit — the officers as part of their dress, and other ranks on special occasions and ceremonial parades. Again, at the battle of Omdurman, when 10,000 Dervishes fearlessly laid down their lives, they fought so well that they were chosen to represent the Sudanese troops at the memorial service to General Gordon held before the ruins of the Palace of Khartoum on 3 September 1898. Thereafter the battalion always played, as they had done at the service, a verse of Gordon's favourite hymn 'Abide with me' before their regimental march. Even today, although the battalion was disbanded in 1924, its memory lives on. Those who buy a box of Abdullah cigarettes may have noticed on the cover a picture of an Egyptian and a Sudanese soldier. The Sudanese is a sergeant in the XIth Sudanese.

* * *

For another fourteen months after the battle of Omdurman fighting continued until the Dervishes

were finally defeated and their leader, the Khalifa Abdallahi, was killed at the battle of Gedid on 24 November 1899 by a force commanded by General Wingate. Even though organised resistance was now at an end, there was for very many years frequent fighting by the Sudanese against a government which was gradually extending its authority and trying to establish peace. Many of the tribesmen had rifles which they had captured from the Turks and Egyptians, and they did not readily abandon their love of fighting. It was not easy to maintain peace amongst a turbulent people who for generations had been accustomed to war and who relied upon the spear or sword to gain whatever they desired. Patrols had often to be despatched at a moment's notice to prevent some local disturbance from developing into a general rebellion. Yet, once the battle was over, many of those who had been fighting against us enlisted in the government forces and fought in the future just as gallantly for us as they had fought against us in the past. During the First World War there were no more loyal supporters of the British than some of the sons of the Khalifa Abdallahi whose kingdom Kitchener had overthrown and whose father had been killed by the army of General Wingate. No wonder that we respected the Sudanese for their magnanimity as we admired them for their courage.

Conditions on active service were hard, even for those accustomed to the sun and heat, especially as the men had often to march at a moment's notice, travel quickly and carry everything they needed. I remember an incident in 1911 when the appearance

of Halley's comet was regarded by some of the people as a sign that British rule in the Sudan was coming to an end. The tribesmen in the next district to mine were excited beyond measure and the Governor of the province sent an urgent request for reinforcements. Within seventy-two hours a company of Sudanese troops came to the rescue after marching along 120 miles of waterlogged soil and swimming across two large rivers.

This was but one of many occasions in the early days of the modern Sudan when disaster was just avoided by the speedy arrival of military aid. Garrisons were few and scattered, but the knowledge that somewhere, even if some distance away, troops were available for dealing with disorders must have discouraged many would-be rebels. Except for these few troops we had only, in this vast country, a small number of civil police to maintain order, suppress the slave trade and put down local risings.

In the government archives are many records of severe fighting against the Nuer, Dinka, Beir, Nuba and other tribes. Many of us regret that almost nothing has been published about this fighting, for it affords eloquent testimony of the difficulties the British had to overcome in the early days of the administration. I often feel that the younger generation of Sudanese do not realise the price that had to be paid in the past before they could live today in prosperity and peace.

PART 2

Trouble in Darfur

I also say it is good to fall, battles are
lost in the same spirit in which they are won.

WALT WHITMAN, *Song of Myself*

TOWARDS the end of August 1921 there were vague rumours of unrest among some of the tribesmen near Nyala and, on 5 September, the District Commissioner (Mr. Tennent McNeill) heard that a certain Feki Abdallah wad el Suheini intended to attack Nyala, one of the loneliest outposts in the Sudan. Nyala lay 120 miles to the south of El Fasher (the capital of Darfur province) and was cut off from it by the same semi-desert of sand and scrub that separated El Fasher from Railhead at El Obeid, 396 miles away; and El Obeid was 428 miles from Khartoum.

Darfur was the last province to be brought under subjection by the Anglo-Egyptian government. After the reconquest of the Sudan in 1898 the Sultan, Ali Dinar, was left in control of Darfur in return for the payment of a nominal tribute. In 1916 Ali Dinar succumbed to the blandishments of the Germans and the Turks, and threw off allegiance to the Sudan government. A brief but brilliant campaign routed the forces of Ali Dinar, and Darfur passed under the

jurisdiction of the Sudan government, which gradually extended its authority over it.

But this control — slight though it inevitably had to be in the circumstances — was resented by many of the people who found themselves deprived of their previous opportunities of enriching themselves at the expense of their neighbours.

The mixed population of Nyala was especially intolerant of any kind of authority when it was imposed by a Christian government. The difficulty of enforcing order was increased by the fact that Nyala was under-staffed. It was impossible for the British Commissioner to visit the outlying districts as often as was desirable and in his absence — though this was not known till later — grave abuses had grown up. Some of the sheikhs responsible for the assessing and collection of taxes robbed the natives. The chief tax-gatherer, following the example set by the Turks and Egyptians, not only did the same but even tied up some of the leading men and flogged them publicly to get more money out of them; and, as in the Turkiya, this official demanded a woman to be put at his disposal in every village before he would interview the head man. Political and economic grievances thus blended with religious fanaticism into a highly dangerous and explosive mixture.

When McNeill heard rumours of the unrest he was faced with difficult alternatives. He could either act on the assumption that these rumours were untrue or exaggerated, and wait until he had obtained more exact information, when it might be too late to take action, or he could send at once for military reinforce-

ments. If the rumours proved unfounded, confidence in the ability of the civil authorities to maintain order might be shattered — a confidence that rested on the prestige of a solitary British official backed by some shadowy power many miles away.

McNeill was unwilling to ask for troops to come to his aid until he was certain that no other course of action would serve. *Fekis* (holy men) had been a frequent cause of trouble in the Sudan, but most of them proved in the end to have been nothing more than a minor and temporary inconvenience. A shot in some fleshy part of the body by a policeman was usually enough to prove that the bullets of the government would not turn to water as the Feki had promised his followers, who then dispersed. Might it not be the same on this occasion? It was hard for McNeill to decide; he was a sick man, in urgent need of leave. He was over a hundred miles away from the nearest white man, and so had no one of his own race with whom to discuss the situation. He may well have thought that ill-health might distort his judgment, or magnify his fears. Not until much later was it known that Abdallah wad el Suheini was a typical leader of a fanatical revival, who had created in the minds of a large and ignorant following a firm belief in his miraculous powers. Drums were said to have been heard in the heavens beating above his head, and whenever he spread his *farwa* (sheepskin rug), upon the ground, eight white vultures settled beside it, four in front and four behind. If he drove his broad spear downwards into the earth, then no one could remove it. He also claimed, as had other

fanatics before him, that he had power to turn the bullets of the government into water. And of this he gave a demonstration when he secretly removed the bullet from a cartridge cap, filled it with water and replaced it in the rifle. Holding the muzzle downwards he let the water dribble to the ground.

McNeill had heard of the proposed attack on September the fifth, and at intervals during the next twelve days he sent out spies to try and find out the Feki's movements and intentions. Most of these spies proved entirely unreliable but on 17 September McNeill had come to the conclusion that Abdallah really meant to attack Nyala. He sent a messenger to El Fasher to report that a certain Feki Abdallah, with a following of about 200 men, had declared himself to be the *Nebi Isa*, or Prophet Jesus, and had proclaimed a *Jihad*, or Holy War. McNeill, still in ignorance of the numbers that Abdallah had actually gathered around him, added that steps were being taken to arrest him.

Three days later an excited chief broke in upon a party of government officials with the news that Nyala was to be attacked that night. The forty civil police and prison warders were issued with more ammunition; carbines, with twenty rounds per man, were handed to the seven employees in the station; everyone from the Kadi to the two sanitary barbers was pressed into the defence, as well as the builder, carpenter and odd-job man who were armed with spears. Some antiquated rifles which had been captured from Ali Dinar in 1916 were given to a few of the merchants to defend themselves near the market-place.

By eight o'clock the issue of arms had been completed and the police and employees stood by to meet the expected attack. But that night nothing happened, and the next day everyone was busily employed in digging pits to hold up a charge of horsemen and in putting a treble strand of barbed wire twenty or thirty yards from the government offices. So frail was this defence, however, that a stampeding police horse crashed through the wire soon after it had been put up.

In these occupations four anxious days were passed and four even more anxious nights in keeping watch. Then, on 24 September, a native arrived with the news that Feki Abdallah was one and a half days' distance away and would attack on the night of the 26th.

Here let us leave the little garrison of some fifty men awaiting an onslaught by a force that apprehension and uncertainty had exaggerated into over 10,000 men, and see what was happening to the messengers that McNeill had despatched to El Fasher as the news became more alarming.

* * *

The first messenger with an account of the trouble left Nyala on 17 September and covered the 120 miles between Nyala and El Fasher in the normal time of five days. Although McNeill had not asked for military assistance the Acting Governor, Mr. Nicholls, felt that the news was sufficiently grave to necessitate the despatch of troops. A force of sixty-four men of the Western Arab Corps left El Fasher about 3 P.M. on 23 September with orders to reach Nyala by the 28th. Both the British officers were sick, so the command of

the flying column devolved upon a Sudanese officer (Captain Bilal Effendi Rizq) with another Sudanese officer, Second Lieutenant Saad Effendi Omar, as his second in command.

During the next few days McNeill despatched five more letters, one of which arrived in El Fasher only two days after it had left Nyala. It was obvious that McNeill was in grave danger: 'I have barricaded the *merkaz* [government offices] buildings,' he wrote, 'and made a barbed wire entanglement round it. I have been quite unable to get news of this man. It is so strange that now I fear there is a general conspiracy, and that even those in the town who pretend to be going to fight desperately and scoff at the slight danger, must know of the conspiracy. . . . Now I have a letter from Nazir Abu el Hameira sent by two men to say that the Feki has a great number of followers. These two men who brought the letter say they hear he has 800 or 900 followers. I feel that they are traitorous but they may be telling the truth as regards a great number. Well, if there is that number it will be a great struggle. The reputation of the Darfurian against rifle fire is that of a coward and we will give it them hot. The only chance for them is to set fire to the roofs of the merkaz houses. Even then I imagine we could stick it out. . . . I regret I am depressed but you need have no fear that everyone inside this fortification will do their utmost. . . . If only you are sending troops, even at the blackest estimate, all may be well.'

The Mounted Infantry had originally intended to march by easy stages, but they had not gone far before

they met one of McNeill's messengers with a letter written in English that no one could read. However, Bilal Rizq, after seeing some English writing in red ink upon the envelope, and hearing the messenger's report, rightly surmised that the news contained in it was urgent and pushed on more rapidly. At midday, after travelling for eight hours, a halt was called. The men had barely settled down when a message was received from the Acting Governor telling Bilal Rizq that the situation at Nyala was critical and that he must get there by the Sunday night. From that time not a moment was lost, the Mounted Infantry walking for an hour, trotting for half an hour, and dismounting for ten minutes, with an occasional halt for watering and feeding the animals and giving the men time to snatch a quick meal. On reaching a place called Menawashi at 10 P.M. on the Saturday the baggage mules gave out. All the grain was left behind and the transport was reduced to a few mules carrying the ammunition and the officers' kit. After only half an hour's halt the column moved off at walking pace and marched all through the night with the men in the highest spirits at the prospect of a fight, and singing as they went. At 5.30 A.M. a two hours' halt was called while the men had a meal, the animals were watered and fed and had their girths loosened. Then on to Nyala which they reached at three o'clock — almost exactly forty-eight hours after leaving headquarters, and that without a single serious casualty to man or horse.

A few hours after the troops had moved out from El Fasher, *Bimbashi* (Major) Chown of the Royal Veterinary Corps returned to the mess, after a long

day's kudu hunting, to hear of the trouble in Nyala. Some time previously Chown had promised a brother-officer to visit McNeill as soon as an opportunity occurred, and he at once volunteered to go to Nyala. Chown was under no delusions as to what the end might be and, as he took farewell of his sergeant, he said to him: 'It is possible I shall never return; but be of good heart!'

Chown left at midnight with one policeman and two servants and covered the first seventy-two miles in twenty-two hours before his baggage camels collapsed. Mounting his servants on two riding camels, Chown went ahead with the policeman whose horse soon gave out while his own stallion went lame. Plodding along on foot in the sweltering heat, with only an occasional ride to give him a little rest, he staggered into Nyala at 7.45 on the morning of Monday, 26 September, after travelling almost without a break for two and a half days and nights. As he entered the town from the north-east he found it apparently deserted, but scraps of paper upon the ground with rough scrawls 'Have no fear; this charm will turn the bullets of the government into water' showed that the enemy had been here already. Chown made his way to the merkaz, where he found McNeill, the Mounted Infantry, the police and a few clerks and merchants standing by for the attack.

* * *

Nyala lay on the dividing line between the barren north and the exuberant south of the Sudan. Its sandy, gravelly soil was a continuation of the conditions that prevailed in the desert wastes, but acacia

scrub, clumps of dom palms and giant tebeldi trees (*baobab*) showed that water was not far below the surface and, in summer, the rains were usually sufficient to produce an adequate crop of sorghum, maize and sesame to satisfy the needs of a not too energetic population.

Some 1100 yards to the south of the merkaz was a *khor*, or watercourse, which only ran for a short time after heavy rains; about midway between the khor and the government buildings was a sandy ridge 300 yards long by 100 yards wide. To the west and south-west dense laot (*Acacia nubica*) bushes crept up to within a few yards of the government buildings; scattered trees and scrub masked the approach from the south-east. On the east there was more open country with some native huts and a large tebeldi tree that was to figure later in the fighting. A little to the north of these was the market-place to which Saad Omar with fifteen men of the Western Arab Corps was despatched — a dispersal of the limited forces that may, at the time, have seemed unwise but which, as events were to prove, saved the day.

At the time of the rising Nyala had no defences of any sort. None of the buildings were loop-holed, nor could they have been held for long as the roofs were of grass and could easily be set on fire. Only in a very few places in the Sudan was there anything that could be dignified by the name of a fort and this often consisted merely of a zariba, or thorn fence, put round a cantonment. The policy of the Sudan government was one of peaceful penetration by an officer or civilian touring his district with an escort of one or two police or soldiers. Military force was used only when

some wild tribe defied the authorities or raided their neighbours for cattle and slaves, as very many did in the early days.

Nyala was a very difficult place to hold, as there was no field of fire. In the khor to the south the enemy could muster without being seen and were invisible for another 700 yards, until they had surmounted the sandy ridge. No one except a few scouts posted on the prison roof had any idea of what was happening until the enemy were but 400 yards away.

Twenty minutes after Chown had arrived, a cloud of dust from the khor proclaimed the opening of the battle that had been so long expected. The distant clamour of innumerable voices, rising to a roar as the Dervishes whipped up courage for the attack, drifted to the waiting garrison, but nothing could be seen of the hordes massing between the banks of the khor.

Ignorant of the numbers that opposed them but filled with indomitable courage, the little garrison awaited the enemy. Guarding the market-place on the north-east was Saad Effendi with his fifteen men. To the west were some three or four hundred 'friendlies' who, with the exception of Sultan Kebkebei and his followers, proved entirely unreliable. These men had been issued with red sashes to distinguish them from the enemy but most of them fled at the first onslaught, while others took off their sashes and joined the rebels.

In the merkaz itself were McNeill and Chown, forty civil police and prison warders led by the submamur, First-Lieutenant Hasan Mohammed el Zein, with single-loading carbines, fifty men of the Western Arab Corps with magazine rifles, commanded by

Bilal Rizq, seven government employees with no experience whatever of fighting, and half a dozen others armed with spears who, as the attack developed, picked up the rifles of the police as they were killed.

The rebels, armed with both throwing spears and long broad-bladed spears, advanced in three columns of footmen under nine flags (patchwork banners with quotations from the Koran written upon them or sewn into them) while two or three hundred horsemen under Feki Abdallah passed to the east of Saad Omar's detachment, probably to cut off the retreat of anyone trying to escape to El Fasher. The eastern or right-flank column made towards the market-place, from which they were driven off by Saad Omar and his Mounted Infantry. Some of the rebels turned west to join the centre column but many went to the huts of the natives a few hundred yards to the north and set them on fire. In this operation the enemy suffered heavy casualties which would have been heavier still had not Saad Omar been afraid of hitting the defenders in the merkaz. The western, or left wing, supported by thirty or forty horsemen, did not at first succeed in its encircling movement and were driven by Sultan Kebkebei on to the centre column. This was a vast horde which delivered the main attack shouting :

> El dīn mansur ; mansur el dīn,
> Nijāhid fi sabeel Allah.
> (Our faith victorious ; our victorious faith,
> We wage a Holy War along God's road.)

Urged to frenzy by the incessant beating of the war-drums, and with loud invocations to Allah and

his prophet and with maniacal cries — as much to fortify their friends as to frighten their foes — the enemy swept on, exulting in their overwhelming numbers. Scores, perhaps hundreds, of the Dervishes, fell in the attack, flecking the ground with the dirty white garments of the dead and dying. Soon the vast flood burst through the meagre strands of the barbed wire; attackers and attacked were locked in a hand-to-hand struggle in which the long spear was more than a match for the short rifle or carbine. In less than ten minutes the defences were overrun; the merkaz had been captured; Chown and many of the police and Mounted Infantry had been killed.

McNeill, driven from the merkaz by the irresistible onrush, tried to lead the few remaining police to the police stables which were surrounded by a zariba, in order to make another stand. Unfortunately there was room for no more than one man at a time to get through the narrow gate. Others attempted to escape through the wire defences and found themselves attacked not only by main columns coming from the south but by hundreds of rebels who suddenly emerged from the scrub on the west. A man was lucky if he had no more than ten of the enemy with whom to contend. McNeill and others were killed and the survivors made their way in a fighting retreat to some cultivation half a mile or so to the north of the merkaz. The day indeed seemed lost.

At 8.45 A.M. the situation was as follows: in the merkaz some fifty Dervishes looting and burning the government buildings; half a mile or more to the north a few police and Mounted Infantry still holding

out until the enemy retreated to join Feki Abdallah by the tebeldi tree on the east. Some of the natives' straw huts were on fire. In the market was Saad Omar with fifteen Mounted Infantry who, although they had not actually been attacked, had expended so much ammunition that there were now only twenty or thirty rounds left per man out of the hundred with which they had begun the engagement. A few hundred yards to the north of the market large numbers of rebels were collecting. Saad Omar could not stay where he was — it meant certain death. If he could get possession of the 2000 rounds of the reserve ammunition which the Mounted Infantry had brought with them he might postpone death.

Saad Omar determined to try and recapture the merkaz, part of which had been set ablaze by the fires on which the prisoners had been cooking a meal when the attack began.

Thus ended the first phase of the battle of Nyala.

* * *

As soon as Saad Omar began to advance upon the merkaz the rebels fled, hurried on their way by shots from twelve warders and police (of whom two were very badly wounded) and three sentries who had been guarding the horse lines and who still held out in the merkaz. Saad Omar took up a defensive position about a hundred yards from the government buildings and facing east. His total force now amounted to forty-six men: the warders, police and horse-line sentries, his own fifteen Mounted Infantry, six Mounted Infantry under the command of Bilal Rizq as well as

seven merchants armed with antique rifles, one clerk and two Mounted Infantry who happened to be on leave in Nyala. Meanwhile the *nogara* (war-drum) of Feki Abdullah was summoning his followers to rally beside the tebeldi tree.

On recapturing the merkaz Saad Omar found that only 200 out of the 2000 rounds of the Mounted Infantry that he had expected to find were still left. His plight would have been hopeless had he not learnt from the small son of one of the clerks that there was a police reserve of 11,000 rounds in the store-room.

For a little while the rebels did nothing and, as Saad Omar did not want to allow the Feki an opportunity to reorganise his forces, he opened fire upon the Dervishes to provoke them to attack. This they did and returned to the assault with the odds still more heavily weighted in their favour.

Now began the most heroic incident in the yet undecided battle. The wives of the police and prison warders joined their menfolk in the fight. With their high-pitched cries they urged their husbands to hold out and brought ammunition and water to them, fetching the water from a pool fifty yards outside the wire defences on the south. Chance has recorded the names of only three of all these women whose names are equally deserving of remembrance: Hamda, Zareiga and Miriam Um Deira who seized the ammunition boxes and tried to break them by hurling them on the ground until Miriam found an axe and hacked them open with it.

This was not Zareiga's only exploit on that grim day. Some townswomen were being attacked in a

compound which was being defended by a man called Zeitun with a sword as his only weapon. Zareiga collected a bunch of spears and went to his rescue, giving them to him as fast as he could hurl them. Nor was this all. When a man stole her master's camel, donkey and baggage, Zareiga, accompanied by Zeitun, rushed after him to make him give up his stolen property!

Never for a moment did the women cease to help and encourage their men and, when the rifles became too hot to hold, they brought water in earthenware jars and poured it on the barrels.

Relentlessly the massed hordes of the Dervishes pressed home their attack even though the defenders exacted a heavy price for every yard they gained. The bullets could not miss so huge a target at so short a range. But the dead, the dying and the wounded were hidden beneath the waves of the irresistible torrent that swept over them; it seemed as if the bullets of the government had indeed been turned to water and been fired without effect.

But still the fight went on, with the government forces running desperately short of ammunition and the enemy almost at their throats. Then occurred one of those little incidents that have turned the tide of battle on so many distant shores. Only twenty yards separated the unequal combatants when Feki Abdallah, with his flag-bearer, drummer and bugler blowing a kudu horn, was seen in the midst of the host about 150 yards away. The trumpeter and drummer were hit and, as the sound of the drum ceased, the enemy wavered for a short space before coming on again.

Saad Omar seized his opportunity and told a sergeant to shoot the Feki and his horse. The horse was hit and the Feki fell from it apparently wounded, and was carried away. With the loss of their leader all seemed lost. It was not merely their military commander who had gone. The supernatural powers with which he had invested himself and cloaked his followers had failed. The driving power was gone; the attack came to a standstill.

The enemy withdrew, hotly pursued by a few friendlies under Sultan Kebkebei, some of whom had taken up the rifles of the dead police.

That afternoon the government forces buried their dead, and the weary garrison, sleeping or waking amid the piled-up bodies that the enemy had left behind, and harassed by the groans of the wounded for whom there was no help, waited for another attack that never came. During the last seventy-five hours the Mounted Infantry had marched 120 miles, stood to arms all one night, fought two desperate battles and now they had to face another sleepless and expectant night. Nor had the civil garrison fared much better; they too had fought and they had kept watch day and night under the mental strain of six days' anticipation of an immediate attack by overwhelming numbers.

A bugle was sounded defiantly from the merkaz to proclaim that the garrison still held out and that the government had won the day.

* * *

What the casualties of the enemy were will never be known. That they must have been very large is

attested by the fact that over 16,000 rounds of ammunition were poured into them, much of it at almost point-blank range. Nor can we do more than form a very rough estimate of the numbers of the rebels who took part in the fighting.

In so confused a medley details are apt to be obscured, and it is difficult to reconstruct the progress of a fight from which so few survived to tell the tale — and those few too busily preoccupied to notice what was happening even a score of yards away. A man engaged in a death struggle with ten, twenty or fifty assailants has little time in which to reflect on the general conflict or to register impressions for the benefit of some future historian. Thousands of men scattered over a vast plain may have seemed to dwindle to but a few hundreds as attention was distracted to some other group. The shimmering heat of a September morning may have multiplied a hundred Dervishes into a party ten times as numerous or reduced them to a band of less than a score.

Probably the most reliable estimate is that of El Ghali Tag el Din who was in prison at Nyala owing — as it was afterwards proved — to a false charge of disloyalty. Tag el Din had had previous engagements with large numbers of Dervishes and had a ringside view of the battle through the wire doors of the prison. He reckoned that the main attack on the merkaz was made by a force as large as that of his tribe when on parade, 2000 men, and that the rest of the army was about as large again, a total of between four and five thousand men, not all of whom were directly involved in the fighting, as some of the

horsemen appear to have been kept in reserve in the khor.

But if the numbers were no higher than 4000 (and they may have been far more) the odds against the government troops, police and civilians, were at least forty to one in the first encounter and eighty to one in the second.

Victory had been won, but at a tragic cost. McNeill, Chown and four clerks were killed. Out of the sixty-five Mounted Infantry seventeen were killed and five wounded. The police lost no less than twenty killed and sixteen wounded out of a total strength of forty. Nearly half the defenders were killed, and so desperate was the fighting that the dead outnumbered the wounded by two to one.

Bilal Rizq and Hasan Mohammed el Zein were both awarded the D.S.O. Saad Omar received the Military Cross and the services of others were suitably recognised for an engagement whose failure might have been the signal for a widespread insurrection. Indeed, rumours of a government defeat spread rapidly throughout Darfur and Kordofan and caused three minor outbreaks that had to be dealt with immediately. Nor, when rewards were being distributed, were the women forgotten. They were given cattle from the herds of the enemy they had helped to defeat, ensuring them prosperity in the years that lay ahead of them and reminding them of the gallant part they had played in the fighting.

* * *

Curious events are recorded of those strange days. A mounted messenger who was sent to El Fasher

immediately after the battle with a despatch and a list of casualties was put under lock and key in order that alarmist accounts might not spread of the results of the fighting. But this was of no avail, as the news of the approaching battle had already been given by one of McNeill's servants who, leaving just as the attack developed, ran with fear-winged feet the 120 miles between the two places in just forty hours. His cowardice formed the theme of many ribald songs that lived long after the name of the servant had been forgotten.

More entertaining were the tales told later over the evening fire of gallant deeds on that great day: of the ring of dead around the dead bodies of McNeill and Chown, who fought on despite their wounds until their ammunition was exhausted and they were left defenceless; of El Ghali Tag el Din, the prisoner, whose wife brought him a silver-handled sword with which he defied the other prisoners in the gaol, madly shouting 'El Din Mansur' as they strove to break out and join the rebels. Hamid Timbal, only a boy, who was one of the horse-line sentries near the merkaz, killed a dozen of the enemy without the loss of a single horse of those which he was guarding. A prison warder, Corporal Musa Rahma, with his right thigh pierced by a pronged fish-hook spear, refused to have it extracted until the fight was over. After asking someone to break off the shaft of the spear and bind up his thigh with a puttee, he shuffled along on his buttocks, supporting himself with his left leg and right hand until he reached the firing line thirty yards ahead.

These are but a few of the gallant deeds that have

been put on record. The records of others no less gallant are buried with those who died in their doing.

* * *

I thought of these folk when in 1924 I had occasion to visit Abu Hamad, district headquarters in the north of Berber province, and asked to be shown the graves of British and Sudanese troops who had been killed in the battle of 7 August 1897 during the Nile campaign. Like Sir Rennell Rodd before me, I was warned that I should only go there during daylight as, when night fell, the twenty-one dead Sudanese mounted guard over the two British officers, Major H. M. Sidney and Lieutenant E. Fitzclarence, who were buried there, and fired on all who approached the graveyard. Sir Rennell paid a moving tribute to the loyalty of these Sudanese — as loyal in death as they had been in life.

Two white stone crosses side by side
  Mark where the true blood flowed,
Where Sidney and Fitzclarence died
  To win the desert road.
And ringed about them close at hand
  In trenches not too deep,
Unnamed, unnumbered in the sand,
  Their dead black troopers sleep.

No cypress here, no English yew,
  No trailing willow waves ;
On wastes where never green things grew
  Lone blanch their outpost graves,
Through scanty fringe of thorn and palm
  The Nile rolls on hard by,
Around them broods the desert calm,
  Above, the desert sky.

Trouble in Darfur

The sunrise scares the waning moon
  And smites the dawn with fire,
The still mirage of torrid noon
  Fades like a vain desire ;
Time's wrinkled hand marks no impress
  Across that desert wide,
And changeless there in changelessness
  Shall these white graves abide.

For they that seek the river's flow
  From the parched eastern waste,
And mark the evening's orange glow,
  Push on in panic haste ;
And caravans from north to south
  That through the desert fare,
Choose other spots to quench their drouth
  When swift night falls — for there

The dark folk tell, as evening dies,
  A sentry's cry alarms
The graves from which dead soldiers rise
  That hear the call to arms ;
And till the new sun's level rays
  Chase night across the sand,
On guard around their English beys
  The dead battalions stand.

World-over thus, good comrades sleep,
  By alien wilds and waves,
Where kindly hands are none to keep
  And tend the frontier graves ;
But here, though not in hallowed ground,
  Beneath the Afric sky,
Inviolately fenced around
  With love and awe they lie.

PART 3

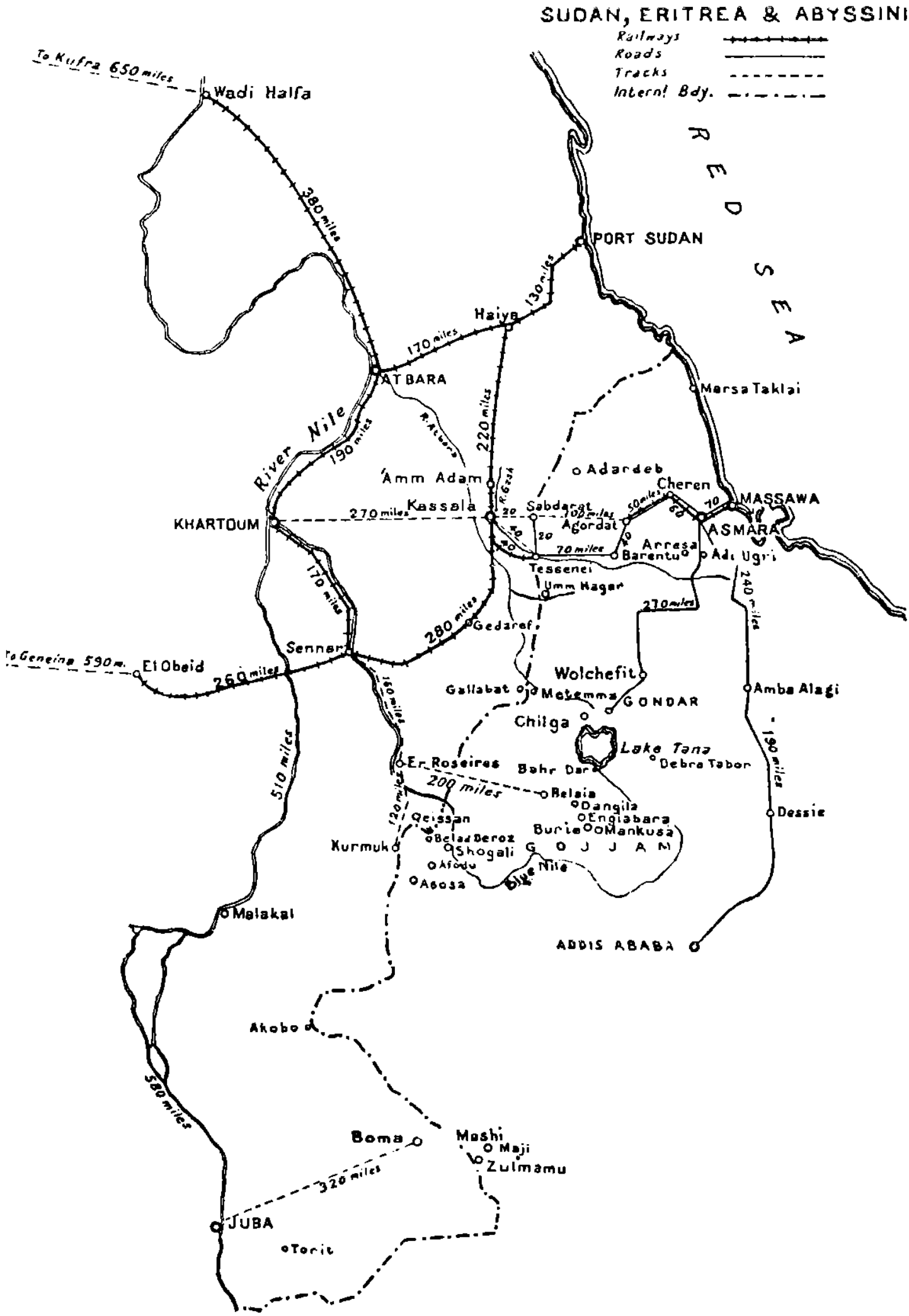
The Two World Wars

Unshaken, unseduced, unterrified,
His loyalty he kept, his love, his zeal.

MILTON, *Paradise Lost*

UNTIL quite recently few people in the Sudan realised that their country was not, and never had been, part of the British Empire; and fewer cared. Their main concern was to live without fear, to practise their religion without interference, and to keep for their own use what they had earned or grown, free from the depredations of robbers or unjust tax-gatherers. They could not forget the old unhappy days of bloodshed, extortion and famine, and were grateful to the British for the prosperity they enjoyed and the security in which they could now pass their lives.

And so the outbreak of war in 1914 was the signal for most touching expressions of loyalty and affection towards the British on the part of Arabs and Sudanese alike — and all the more remarkable when it is remembered that the Sultan of Turkey (the Khalifa of Islam) had declared a Holy War against the Christians. But this declaration, and the flood of propaganda which followed it, had no effect upon the millions of Mohammedans in the Sudan. Hundreds of letters and



From 'The Royal Engineers Journal' by courtesy of the Editor

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telegrams were received by the British from all parts of the Sudan offering sympathy, money and help. They came from religious leaders and secular chieftains, Kadis and Imams of Mosques, merchants, cultivators and native clerks. Offers to fight on behalf of the British poured in. 'The British', wrote an important kinglet in the Southern Sudan, 'brought grain from India to save the whole Sudan from famine. To maintain such a government I am ready to fight the Turks or anyone else if the government so wishes. All my people think so too and I will go myself in front of the battle whenever I am asked to do so.'

'We will die to the last man', said the head of a great Kordofan tribe, 'in the service of our present government. We are prepared to sacrifice the last penny of our money and our last breath to fight her enemies and to oppose those who oppose her.'

Even more impressive perhaps was a telegram from the Nazir of the Hadendowa — the Fuzzy-Wuzzies who had been fighting against us not so many years before. 'We deeply regret to hear of the outbreak of war between our Empire, Great Britain and Turkey. We, on behalf of our tribe, the Hadendowa, beg to express our great and sincere loyalty to our government and our Empire, Great Britain. We are with her, heart and soul, in all circumstances and, in support of her victory, we will sacrifice ourselves, our property and all we have to offer — as is only our duty to do.'

I remember well an occasion in November 1914 when I was trekking by night to save the camels from the heat of the day and met a dozen or more elderly

sheikhs and some of their followers about two o'clock in the morning. They were carrying spears and were lightly clad in their simple native garments of white cotton. We salaamed, stopped and talked for a little while and I asked them where they were going. 'We have heard', said the leader, 'that there is a war in *Uruba* [Europe] and that the Inglizi are fighting in it, so we are on our way to help you in your battles.' I felt very churlish at having to refuse their kind offer, which was all the more generous as among the volunteers were chiefs of the Batahin tribe whom only a few months before I had had to punish severely for cattle-lifting.

Some of these messages of sympathy and loyalty were afterwards published in a little book that is a treasured possession of those of us who have it and a happy reminder of bygone days.

So it was a quarter of a century later when the 1939–45 war broke out. Offers of help and messages of loyalty poured in from every part of the Sudan and the people joined without hesitation in a war which was to win them imperishable renown. Those who could not fight sent gifts with almost embarrassing generosity and large sums were collected for the Red Cross and other funds. Sir el Sayed Abderrahman el Mahdi, K.B.E., C.V.O., for example, not only made generous gifts of money and cotton but entertained many of the British troops in his home. Rich and poor vied with one another in doing all they could to help. One of the Baggara tribes gave 104 of their best horses as remounts, and the Meidob drove a flock of sheep across 400 miles of desert scrub to

Omdurman as a gift to the British. Even more touching perhaps was the offer of one of the most backward and unruly tribes, as yet unaccustomed to the use of money, which offered to raise a loan of ten pounds to help the government in its hour of need!

Nor were these offers of service and gifts of money the only contribution that the peoples of the Sudan made to our joint war effort. With hardly a single complaint they accepted rationing and other restrictive measures which they found it difficult to understand and for which they could not appreciate the reason. The British Commonwealth of Nations (and indeed the whole Free World) owes a deep debt of gratitude to the Sudanese for their loyalty, sympathy and help.

* * *

On 10 June 1940 — six days after the evacuation of Dunkirk — Mussolini declared war on Great Britain and France. With France beaten to her knees and England almost defenceless, and Germany in control of nearly the whole of Europe, Mussolini felt that his dream of a great Italian empire in Africa would at last come true. He saw before him an empire stretching from Tripoli and Libya to Eritrea, Abyssinia and Italian Somaliland, incorporating Egypt and the Sudan, British and French Somaliland — an empire of nearly 3,000,000 square miles with a population of over 32,000,000, an empire that might even be increased by yet another 675,000 square miles and another 13,000,000 people unless his rapacious and more powerful ally wanted Uganda, Kenya, Tanganyika and Zanzibar for himself.

The wealth of Africa seemed to be within his grasp: cotton, grain, sesame, coffee, groundnuts and uncountable flocks and herds, as well as coconuts, pineapples, mangoes, spices and all the luscious products of the tropics.

He seemed about to gain possession of them all.

In preparation for this day Mussolini had amassed in East Africa an army of at least 300,000 men fully equipped with mechanical transport, as well as 400 guns and 200 aircraft. But the whole of this force was not available for offensive action, as many of his troops had to be kept in Abyssinia, where gassing attacks and other atrocities had kindled an inextinguishable hatred in the hearts of the inhabitants. Only a few years before war broke out an attack upon the Italian Governor-General had been followed by the massacre of over 9000 Abyssinians in Addis Ababa and the summary execution of many members of the ruling families in the provinces. Monks had been dragged from their monasteries and shot: every Abyssinian who had received a European education was deported or murdered. The unorganised and leaderless Abyssinians were powerless against the numerous Italian troops but waited in sullen hostility to unsheathe the sword of avenging justice. Thus, discontent was so widespread that the Italians feared to deplete their garrisons in the country — a risk that, as a matter of fact, the Italians over-estimated. Some of the natives had been subdued by the ferocity of the Italian revenge; others, divided by racial antipathies, quarrelled among themselves. Moreover, the Abyssinians had been so awed by the downfall of

France, which they regarded as the greatest military power in the world, that it was not until later, when they had been supplied with arms and ammunition from the Sudan and when the Emperor had re-entered the country, that they took a very active part in the war against the Italians.

Facing the armies of Mussolini was the little Sudan Defence Force of 4500 men — aptly called a 'defence force' seeing that it had been brought into being only to enforce internal order and was not organised for external campaigns. It had no tanks, and no guns except a few antiquated relics outside the Palace in Khartoum which were used (in much trepidation) for the firing of salutes on ceremonial occasions. The Royal Air Force supplied seven obsolete Vincent machines (dating from 1928) and these were the only aircraft until two bomber squadrons were based on Port Sudan to protect the sea-route to India and the east. Even some of these 4500 men had to be kept for garrison duties in the interior and to prevent disturbances among the unruly tribes along the Abyssinian frontier. Some of these frontier tribesmen resented the suppression of their poaching and slave-raiding *razzias*, while the Nuer — always itching for a fight or a cattle-rustling expedition — saw in the general upheaval a chance of indulging in little forays of their own.

The various units that composed the Sudan Defence Force were unable to take the field as an organised whole, for since its sole object had been the maintenance of interior security it had necessarily been developed on territorial lines and each unit was manned

by natives accustomed to the particular terrain in which they would have to operate. The men fed themselves when in barracks and were able to move out at a moment's notice with a few handfuls of grain and with no transport to hamper their speedy movements. This simple system, however, occasioned many difficulties later when the Sudan Defence Force was called upon to operate with the Imperial armies, with their regular system of rations and supplies and the meticulous use of Army Forms indents. 'The Indian supply machinery did not know what the Sudanese wanted, nor the language or ways of the people. The S.D.F., brought up on a policy of self-sufficiency and great elasticity in regulations and procedure, did not take kindly to the more orthodox methods of regular units and formations. The commanders and staffs of these, faced with the problem of administering a private army, the like of which they had never seen, whose language they could not understand, whose regulations were non-existent or incomprehensible, whose methods, to say the least, were vague and individualistic, and which was officered by enthusiasts and amateurs, showed great patience and eventually solved the problem effectively.' [1]

'The composition of the various Corps', as Brigadier Knott mentions in the same article, 'differed according to the country over which they might operate, and the type of patrol or expedition probably required.' In the north the maintenance of security was entrusted for the most part to the Camel Corps,

[1] Brigadier A. J. Knott, O.B.E., 'The Sudan Defence Force goes to War', vol. lviii, Sept. 1944, of the *Royal Engineers Journal.*

in the west to Mounted Infantry and some camelry, and in the east to infantry companies with a few mounted troops. In the south the defence force consisted of Equatorial natives — speaking different languages and barely removed from savagery but none the less gallant and devoted.

In 1934 a few motor machine-gun companies had been formed and, on 1 June 1940, some 3·7-inch howitzers arrived in the Sudan, the first of sixteen that were to come from the Middle East. At first, to maintain security in a country as large as Europe and to resist an invasion from outside, there were only 4500 men of the Sudan Defence Force, a few hundred civilian police and three battalions of English troops from the West Yorkshire, Worcestershire and Essex regiments — 2500 men in all — who were stationed in Khartoum, Atbara and Port Sudan. Opposed to them were over 100,000 Italian troops with artillery, tanks, armoured vehicles and about 200 aeroplanes. They could invade the Sudan along 1200 miles of frontier from Karora in the north, through Kassala, Kurmuk and Gambeila, or by way of the Boma plateau in the south. Despite the overwhelming odds against them, there was no hesitation on the part of anyone in the Sudan; all threw themselves wholeheartedly into the war effort. In fact, the only discordant note was one struck by a certain sheikh who saw no reason why a few companies of the Sudan Defence Force should not immediately attack the 100,000 men who faced them, and voiced his disapproval of British inaction in no measured terms!

Outnumbered in men and machines, General Platt,

the Kaid (Commander) of the Sudan Defence Force, must often have felt how impossible was his task. He had to guard nearly 1200 miles of railway between Atbara, Port Sudan, Kassala, Sennar and Khartoum against an airborne attack or a sudden raid, as well as the Butana bridge across the Atbara and make secure 1200 miles of frontier stretching from Egypt to Abyssinia. On the principle that it is no good winning on the frontier if you lose in the capital Platt kept his three British battalions to protect Khartoum, Atbara and Port Sudan. There were no great obstacles in the way of an Italian advance along the Red Sea littoral on a twenty-five mile front as this was practically secure from ground interference on the west and nearly secure from the east. Through Port Sudan passed from 80 to 90 per cent of all the men and materials which came to the Sudan across the sea. Its loss would have been disastrous.

* * *

The civil and military authorities in the Sudan were not caught wholly unprepared by the outbreak of war. After Munich stores of all kinds had been gradually collected in anticipation of the day when the Sudan might be cut off from the rest of the world and thrown back upon its own meagre resources. Half a million railway sleepers had been imported; stocks of gas-masks, anti-gas equipment, hospital stores, textiles and leather had been accumulated; even such little items as matches had not been forgotten; and when war with Italy broke out the various civil departments which had already switched over from

their peace-time occupations to the provision of military equipment, intensified their efforts. No department expanded more rapidly than did the Stores and Ordnance, whose employees increased in number from 400 to over 6000 in the space of little more than a year. By the middle of 1940 it had been linked up with the Mechanical Transport department of the Sudan Defence Force and the British Ordnance department to form a War Supply department, brilliantly organised by Major Guy Foley, M.C. (afterwards C.M.G., O.B.E.), as Chief Ordnance Officer. Its various operations included the production of armoured cars, motor vehicles and arms, the servicing of weapons captured from the enemy, the provision of bomb-clips for the R.A.F. and of underwear for nurses in the Free French forces, and a scarlet cover for the ceremonial umbrella of the Emperor of Abyssinia who was also supplied by the railways department with eight large copper drums. Meteorological balloons were made for the French at Fort Lamy, direction-finding apparatus for the R.A.F. Bows and incendiary arrows were contrived for setting fire to enemy huts in the Baro salient.

Even before the outbreak of hostilities the Stores and Ordnance department had made an invaluable contribution to the successful campaign against Abyssinia that was to follow. Bren guns had not functioned properly under tropical conditions in the Sudan but the defects were remedied in time for the War Office at home to make the necessary adjustments. Yet, despite all the care that had been taken to anticipate every eventuality, unexpected difficulties sometimes

arose: when the Fourth and Fifth Indian divisions arrived without any office equipment the Sudan authorities had to provide them with everything they needed, from stationery, pens and ink to tables, chairs and specially printed forms.

Military work of all kinds was undertaken by the Railways department, which employed over 2000 men and boys with very few Englishmen to help or supervise. All this was the more remarkable when it is remembered that the Sudan is an agricultural community and not a highly mechanised society. Less than half a century before, there was not in the Sudan a single native stonemason, smith, carpenter, engineer or technician able to produce anything but spears, hoes and a few primitive agricultural tools. Ingenious improvisations made good some inevitable shortages: old Ford springs were converted into machetes, odd bits of scrap iron into hinges; soda-water and beer bottles were cut down to make tumblers. Furniture for hospitals, canteens, camps and institutes was made from wooden packing-cases in which aeroplanes had come from America. Firebricks were made out of old broken ones and patched up with Egyptian cement. When a camp was formed at Erkowit the baths were cast out of a mixture of concrete and broken glass and 'rubbed to a pleasing polish' as a speaker said in a broadcast from Omdurman. To eke out the diminishing supplies of coal, and to save shipping, some of the trains were run on locally made charcoal briquettes or on cotton seed. This cotton seed was reasonably satisfactory once the engine was in motion but it could only with the greatest difficulty get up a sufficient

head of steam when a train stopped. Grunting and snorting, the engine jolted out of a station as if unwilling to continue its journey. Cotton seed was also used in the steamers for fuel, which generated so terrific a heat that passengers in the saloon found the cutlery almost too hot to pick up. Great columns of glowing sparks shot out of the funnels; the steamer was a floating inferno.

To the Public Works department, in addition to their normal duties, fell the task of clearing hundreds of miles of tracks or of making new roads near various depots, erecting wireless stations, installing air-conditioning plants and power stations, making Lewis gun mountings, caterpillar-wheels, shields for Bren gun carriers, centrifugal pumps, stretchers, lorry bodies and a host of military necessities. Nine permanent aerodromes with twenty large hangars were constructed out of such materials as were available. New wells had to be dug in many places and immense difficulties had to be overcome before an adequate water-supply was assured for the increasing military forces. Damaged ships limped for repairs into Port Sudan, where the water-supply almost gave out after three consecutive years of low rainfall. Dyes were made for camouflaging tents, and the wood from which they were made was used once more to fire the boilers for preparing the dyes. Attempts were even made to invent a dye for camouflaging the camels but they objected so strongly to this indignity that the scheme had to be abandoned.

The activities of the government varied from the preparation of lymph and vaccines to the setting up

of a match factory in the Imatong mountains, a biltong factory in the southern Sudan and a broadcasting station in Omdurman; from the printing of leaflets in the Amharic language, with the Emperor of Abyssinia's seal, to making wireless-telegraph equipment and metalled runways for aircraft; from the staffing of lighthouses in the Red Sea to the transport of thousands of gallons of petrol from bomb-threatened areas.

Boys between twelve and seventeen years of age voluntarily worked ten hours a day in their anxiety to help. Many of these boys had been undergoing instruction in a school run by the Stores and Ordnance department, but found the new opportunities available to them far more congenial than learning the three Rs or spending their time in other lessons. Every day of the week a thousand Sudanese went to their work ten miles away near Gordon's tree, leaving their homes before five o'clock in the morning, clinging to little overcrowded tramcars or running after trains that would not stop, and returning home long after dark. Sometimes they were stranded without food many miles from their homes when they missed a tramcar. No one bothered about holidays or an eight-hour day.

Nor were the labours of the Sudanese confined to meeting the demands of the troops in the Sudan. 200,000 *angareebs* (native bedsteads of interwoven hide or rope) were made for the use of the Middle East forces in Egypt, Syria and Palestine, as well as handles for a vast variety of tools, and enough rope to encircle the world. To help the war effort, and stimulated

no doubt by high prices, the people sold the cattle and sheep by which they set such store, to feed the troops in the Sudan and elsewhere. The provinces of Darfur and Kordofan were emptied of all horses fit for military service so that they could be employed in areas where mechanical transport could not operate.

Trade was controlled, food subsidies introduced and the profits from a centralised export trade were held in trust for the community. The cost of living which rose 300 per cent in Egypt and Palestine increased by less than 100 per cent in the Sudan. The economic situation was so ably handled that, by April 1944, there was a balance of over £700,000 in the Stabilisation Fund. That these restrictions, so irksome to a proud and independent people, were loyally accepted was due to the confidence that forty years of British rule had built up.

* * *

Amid the turmoil of war the everyday lives of the citizens had still to be carried on and the civil administration to continue. Malefactors were not transmuted in the crucible of war into a finer metal, nor did sinners become saints just because there were fewer police to prevent their ill-doings or bring them to belated justice. Locusts, which at one time threatened to be the enemy's best ally, had to be dealt with by distant patrols; hundreds of miles of canals in the Gezira, 'The Island' (*i.e.* the land between the Blue and White Niles), had to be cleaned of weeds. Scientific research could not be abandoned, nor medical work cease. Personal grievances about a plot of land on

which a neighbour had encroached were none the less real because a war was raging some hundreds of miles away. Arrangements were even made for the pilgrimage to Mecca to continue in spite of difficulties in the Red Sea. District Commissioners, reduced in numbers, over-worked and often ill, had to make longer and more frequent journeys in the backward areas to remind the inhabitants of the presence of government or to reassure them. Several of these District Commissioners, as the tide of battle rolled away from the Sudan, were sent to territories from which the enemy had been driven, or where their knowledge of the Arabic language and Islamic customs could help in the administration of countries as far apart as Iraq and Cyrenaica, Palestine and Eritrea. Members of the Education Department were lent to Aden and Mohammedan judges to Nigeria.

In their spare time all sections of the community played their part as Air Raid Wardens, staffed the searchlight squadrons and anti-aircraft companies, and helped in other civil defence services. In these duties Sudanese, Greeks, Egyptians, British, Syrians and Armenians all cooperated. Racial and religious differences were forgotten: Greek Orthodox, Greek, Roman and Syrian Catholics, Copts, Coptic Presbyterians, Church of England, Plymouth Brethren, Jews, a Quaker and a Moravian and every branch of 'the people of the Book' served in what Henderson describes as a comic opera army and perhaps the most democratic body in the world. Gordon College graduates and European clerks drilled beside artisans and labourers. British judges of the High Court, wearing

exactly the same uniform, and manning the same gun as office messengers and pedlars from the Suq joined in the common effort. Every kind of activity that would help to win the war was willingly undertaken, whether it was an experiment in growing potatoes in out-of-the-way places or the organisation of a bomb-disposal squad.

Yet somehow or other, in spite of frequent difficulties and occasional dangers, the life of the community went on; and for many of the people only the rising price of some essential commodities or the restriction on the sale of others indicated that the Sudan was at war.

Out of the turbulent maelstrom of war the peoples of the Sudan struggled with renewed vigour and a new confidence in their own capacities. In the absence on active service of their British leaders and advisers, the Sudanese were given positions of authority and responsibility for which, in the slower tempo of peace, they might have waited for several years. These positions they filled with credit to themselves and usefulness to others, thus gaining experience which fitted them for the even greater authority and responsibility which lie before them now.

* * *

The Sudan government received four hours' notice of the outbreak of a war for which, whatever were Mussolini's grandiose ambitions, the Italians had little relish. They were no more desirous of fighting their former allies, whose friends they had been since the days of Garibaldi, than were their fellow-countrymen

in the western deserts of Egypt. On New Year's Eve 1939, only six months before, British and Italian officers had been dining together at Metemma and drinking to the continuance of good relations. The day before war was actually declared Major Maurice, the District Commissioner at Gambeila, was warned by the Italians of the imminence of hostilities and guaranteed a safe conduct as far as Jokau provided that all arms at Gambeila were surrendered and the wireless station was left intact. As late as May 1940, officers of the Sudan Defence Force in Kassala and Gedaref were being invited to Asmara as guests of the Italian officers with whom they had made friends on the frontier.

Perhaps it was this unwillingness to fight that accounted for the erratic and half-hearted efforts of the Italian air force, or it may have been discouraged by the failure of its government to deliver a promised consignment of bombs. On 9 June the Italian s.s. *Umbria* carrying 5000 tons of bombs for the air force in Eritrea was lying off Port Sudan — a tantalising prize that the British naval authorities were loath to see elude their grasp; but as war had not been declared nothing could be done. However, the next day she was seen to be sinking, having been scuttled by the crew on the receipt of secret orders; and 'the Admiral Commanding at Aden, who was in Port Sudan at the time, rushed down to the hotel jetty and executed a hornpipe of joy, to the great wonderment of the taxi-drivers waiting there'.[1]

Throughout the war the bombing from the air was

[1] B. Kennedy-Cooke, M.C., *Kassala at War*.

for the most part singularly haphazard and ineffective. Concentrations of sheep, goats and camels round a water-hole or well were often selected as a target by the Italian air force, and the slaughter of these animals provoked the nomads into taking interest in a war which had at first seemed to some of them too remote to be any concern of theirs; and when an influential sheikh at Kassala was killed by a bomb the tribes were roused to give us all the help they could. Indeed the Italians could hardly have chosen targets — if they did choose them and were not dropping their bombs indiscriminately in their hurry to return safely to their bases — better calculated to infuriate the people. They bombed the Sudan Interior Mission at Doro, a place of no possible military significance, killing two American missionaries and wounding two others; and they selected for another target the venerated tomb of the Wad el Hashi family, interspersing their bombs with Arabic leaflets saying that Italy was the protector of Islam and all its institutions. More legitimate targets were Khartoum and Omdurman, which were bombed once or twice. Lying at the junction of the two Niles they were easy to locate, especially as, before the war, the Italians had run a civil air-service between Abyssinia and Khartoum.

* * *

Once war was declared, the Sudan strained every nerve to prepare for the day when it would no longer be upon the defensive, but would be ready to attack. The Sudan forces ultimately expanded to six times their peace-time strength — no easy task, as there were

so few officers that some of the recruits had actually to be trained by police in pre-enlistment centres. The difficulties of transport were immense. Before the battle of Keren could be fought 1000 lorry loads of shells had to be brought 150 or 200 miles from Railhead to feed the hungry guns.

Vast distances and inadequate communications increased the difficulties of mobilisation. Troops from Darfur, for instance, had to march a thousand miles to reach their frontier posts. From far and near fighting men made what haste they could to reinforce the gallant but incredibly few defenders of a country that was of supreme importance to the strategy of the whole war.

The Sudan Defence Force was part of General Sir Archibald Wavell's command, which covered all the battlefields in north and east Africa with bases as far apart as Cairo, Khartoum and Nairobi. Supplies from Great Britain and the U.S.A. had to make their devious way by sea to Port Sudan or by land and air from Takoradi, 3000 miles away on the west coast of Africa. Cairo was separated from Nairobi by over another 3000 miles of road, rail and river.

So great was the area that Wavell had to defend, and so small the resources at his disposal, that no sooner was a victory gained on one front than the battle-weary troops had to be transferred to another more than a thousand miles away. The Fourth Indian division was switched from Sidi Barrani in Cyrenaica to fight at Keren, and then had to be brought back to defend Egypt against the threat of Rommel. Other units, having accomplished their

tasks in southern Abyssinia, were despatched to Egypt in March 1941.

* * *

There were three main operational areas which may conveniently be designated as the Upper Nile, Blue Nile and Red Sea battle zones.

The Upper Nile stretched for 400 miles from Khor Yabus in the north to the Boma plateau, and for another 150 miles from the Boma plateau to Kenya. This southern area was guarded by two companies of Equatorials recruited from some of the wildest tribes in the Sudan. To defend the rest of the frontier of 400 miles there were 192 armed civil police, with another 355 in reserve. Some of these reserves were stationed in Malakal — two or three hundred miles away — but most of them were scattered in various outposts to maintain order amongst hundreds of thousands of natives, and were not available as reinforcements.

During the rains much of the land is under water and much of the rest is so swampy that the movement of troops was at all times arduous and sometimes impossible altogether. More than once unforeseen clashes occurred as friend could not be distinguished from foe in the high grass. Flies and mosquitoes tormented the police day and night. There was no shelter from the torrential downpours; it was impossible to light fires for the men to dry their clothing or to cook their meagre ration of sodden grain. Often the police had nothing but this grain to eat and a very little tea, sugar or a few groundnuts which they

carried in their haversacks. They lived, as someone said of them, 'like guineafowl' on what they could pick up. There was no way of crossing the flooded water-courses except by swimming and always at the risk of being seized by a crocodile.

Confronting these 192 police were 4000 trained troops, a pack battalion, and large reserves not far away. Yet, despite the hardships that the nature of the country and the shortage of supplies imposed upon them, the police patrols were continually active, often wading or swimming for many miles on their strenuous journeys.

Operations began with sporadic invasions of the Sudan by undisciplined native levies from the lowlands of Abyssinia. These 'Banda', as they were called, were encouraged by the Italians to engage once more in those traditional raiding forays which for many years past the Sudan government had almost succeeded in preventing.

More serious was the Italian capture of Gambeila, a trading post in Abyssinia which had been granted to the Sudan government by the Abyssinian authorities some years before — a concession which the Italians had always been unwilling to recognise after their conquest of Abyssinia. Major Maurice with his twenty-seven police was compelled to retire and this left open the way for an attack on Nasser and Malakal. Other outposts were also withdrawn but, in spite of the overwhelming forces arrayed against them, the Sudan police frequently attacked enemy positions and drove the Italians out, or kept them always on the alert by a variety of expedients. On one occasion

a policeman with Bimbashi Wedderburn-Maxwell entered Kurmuk, which was in enemy hands, and scattered leaflets in the town. Another policeman (Jongbai Liri) made his way into Dul and, finding it deserted, spent a happy night in the Italian officers' mess — a pleasing interlude in an otherwise monotonous existence.

Gradually the rainy season passed and the country began to dry up. Meanwhile reinforcements were coming in, and G. N. I. Morrison (the civilian acting as Governor of the Upper Nile Province and also as the military commander of the area) recorded with jubilation the arrival of four Lewis guns which, he said, once the men had been trained to handle them, would enable him to defend Malakal against enemy aircraft — not ideal anti-aircraft weapons though perhaps more effective than rifles.

On 24 October the advance guards of the King's African Rifles arrived at Malakal, Melut and Renk, but it was another two months before there were sufficient trained troops to lighten the burden of the fighting and patrolling which had been borne for so long by a few civil police.

* * *

The Blue Nile force had a shorter frontier to defend — a distance of about 160 miles from Kurmuk to Roseires and the Dinder river — but it was more important than that further south, as it held the key to Singa and the Sennar dam — a prize of the greatest value. When later the railway 'loop' — Haiya, Atbara, Khartoum, Sennar, Gedaref — was cut by the fall of

Kassala, General Platt could only send reinforcements and stores towards Kassala via Haiya and Sennar. The loss of the railway line across the Sennar dam would have put the southern arm of this 'loop' out of action and increased his difficulties immeasureably.

Fortunately, although it was impossible to prevent raids by the enemy, the numerous streams along the Abyssinian border and the scrub and trees with which the country was covered rendered a large scale invasion of the Sudan difficult in the summer of 1940 as the rains had already set in. The total police force available here amounted to only 110 men with no military training and at first no troops near at hand to reinforce them. They were distributed in many little outposts each of which, when attacked, could do no more than fight a delaying action and withdraw to another station where they might find another small group of police and hope to put up a stiffer resistance. These 110 men were opposed by 5000 Italian troops with pack artillery, aeroplanes and machine-guns — odds of fifty to one leaving out of account the disparity in arms, machines and training.

On 7 July 1940 a battalion of Italian troops, supported by artillery, machine-guns and two aeroplanes, attacked Kurmuk, which was held by seventy civil police under the command of their District Commissioner, Mervyn Bell, and compelled the garrison to retire. A few hundred yards outside Kurmuk was a zariba where the chief of Ora, finding himself surrounded by the Italians, had gone over to the enemy and was helping to supply them with food. Meccawi Effendi Akrat, now Assistant Sudan Agent in London,

went with a small patrol into the zariba, arrested the chief under the noses of the Colonial battalion and brought him back. Even more astounding was the exploit of a policeman Sol Abderrahman Abdallah who stayed behind to look for his wife. The Italians, not realising their greatly superior strength and fearing a counter-attack, began to withdraw. Abderrahman found his wife and, with the help of half a dozen police who had been cut off in Kurmuk, set fire to the roofs of the government buildings, destroyed two motor cars, brought back some mules and the government safe with £600 in cash and returned triumphantly to his base. Most of us will agree that the British Meritorious Medal of the Civil Division of the Order of the British Empire which he received for his enterprise had been richly earned.

Other isolated posts had to be abandoned. But neither the uncertain temper of some people who were ill-disposed towards the government for the suppression of the slave-trade between Abyssinia and the Sudan, nor the difficulties of flooded rivers and dense bush prevented a regular patrolling of the frontier that kept the enemy for ever on the alert.

Apart from these patrols all that could be done was to set up road blocks, stop any defiles through which the enemy might try to penetrate, train more mounted police, and encourage the local inhabitants by assuring them that reinforcements were on their way.

For several months the situation was tense, and there was constant cause for anxiety. Early in October a force of about 200 men under Italian officers advanced towards Keili from Kurmuk, and settled

down for the night at Metemma, five miles from Keili. Bimbashi Parker, a civilian Inspector of the Sudan Plantations Syndicate, received information of their approach and at once set out with twenty-five police. About nine o'clock he located the enemy who were eating their evening meal, and attacked them. It was ten minutes before they could reorganise and return the fire; and again, ignorant of the smallness of the force opposed to them, they retired to Kurmuk carrying many wounded with them.

A more serious invasion took place a few days later when a force of between 1500 and 2000 men under the command of Colonel Rolle penetrated eighty miles into the Sudan and reached a point only twenty-five miles distant from Roseires, in spite of attacks made upon his column by friendly irregulars organised by a Sudanese chieftain, Mek Nail. But constant harrying by the police and these irregulars and the difficulty of finding food and water for so large a force, brought this advance to a standstill. Rolle was compelled to withdraw, leaving behind many stragglers who were either killed by the natives, or captured or killed by the police following the enemy up. In this unsuccessful raid the Italians lost about 400 men as well as many mules and rifles — some of which, marked 'Somaliland Police', recalled an earlier success of the Italians so many miles away.

Behind this slender screen of civil police massive movements began to gain momentum. Rifles, stores and money were issued to Abyssinian patriots and large numbers of camels were collected for an invasion of Gojjam. By the end of the year preparations

had been completed for the reconquest of Abyssinia, and Ethiopian troops were ready to march. The 2/6th (Tanganyika) battalion of the King's African Rifles was proceeding to its advanced posts and the police were reorganised to cooperate with them. The K.A.R. were followed by Belgian troops and, by June, 225 officers and 5000 other ranks had reached their forward positions. The Italians had been driven out of the country in the Blue Nile area that they had occupied. They had had a great opportunity of winning a spectacular victory by the capture of Singa and Sennar, cutting the railway line across the Sennar dam and opening the road to Khartoum. That they failed to grasp this opportunity was due to a handful of Sudanese civil police, a Nuba company of the Camel Corps, and some men of the Frontier battalion who, by their strenuous patrolling, deceived the Italians, and by their courage thwarted them.

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More vulnerable than either the Blue Nile or the Upper Nile sections was the Red Sea area bordering on Eritrea, where very large Italian forces had been concentrated. Kassala, almost on the Eritrean frontier, was only 270 miles distant from Khartoum and even less from the important railway centre of Atbara. There were no natural obstacles to hamper the movements of mechanised units. The country was almost dead flat with occasional patches of *tabas* grass and sandy stretches which were carefully plotted on the maps in the hope of leading the Italians on to them should they venture to advance.

On 4 July 1940 Kassala, defended by one company of Mounted Infantry, No. 5 motor machine-gun company and a few police, was attacked by the Italians with every man, gun, aeroplane and armoured car they could bring into the battle. Two colonial brigades (each 3000 strong) and four cavalry regiments — a total of 8000 men — camelry, eighteen tanks and many guns were launched into the assault. Wave after wave of Italian aircraft dropped their bombs upon the Sudanese who cursed their inability to retaliate. Tank succeeded tank in what seemed to the harassed defenders an unending stream. Showers of machine-gun bullets bespattered what scanty cover the troops and police could find as, ever on the move, they took up one position after another. For twelve hours the attacks went on without a break, but the few hundred men, courageous though they were, could not hold out indefinitely against the thousands by whom they were assailed, or the mass of machinery by which they were supported. The machine ultimately overwhelmed the man, and the little garrison was compelled to retire, leaving behind a few police who had held on too long to make good their escape. But they could be proud of their achievement when they balanced up their account. For the loss of one man killed, three wounded and sixteen missing (some of whom found their way back to their units later) they had put out of action over 500 of the enemy and not less than six tanks.

By ones and twos the trapped police made their way out of Kassala bringing with them invaluable information and most of their rifles which they had

buried each night in a different place and finally smuggled through the Italian cordon hidden in bunches of straw. The only booty that fell into the hands of the Italians was one truck, one machine-gun which had been spiked, and some small arms ammunition. Nor did the abandonment of Kassala quench the ardour of the troops for, during the withdrawal, there occurred one of those fantastic episodes (so typical of the Sudanese) which did so much to endear them to the English.

A mile or two out of Kassala one of the men suddenly remembered that he had left behind a pair of native slippers (worth perhaps ten piastres or two shillings) and went back to recover them. He was cut off, took refuge in one of the houses and killed twenty-three of the enemy before he was himself shot.

An equally fine defence to that of Kassala was put up by a native officer and thirty men who held the fort at Gallabat against an attack by 2000 men supported by artillery and aeroplanes until they were compelled to retire. And this they did so skilfully that their own losses were insignificant. For this gallant performance the Sudanese Company Officer in command received the Military Cross and thus won the distinction of being the first native of the Sudan to be decorated by the British in the Second World War.

In the north of the Red Sea area Karora, held by five police, had to be given up, as did Queissan in the south.

But the Italians made no attempt to exploit these various successes, strategically important though some

of them were. Instead, they put Kassala into a state of defence and concentrated at least five battalions there. But even with their superior forces they were unable to protect their communications with Eritrea from constant harrying by a few motor machine-gun companies operating from only a mile or two outside the town.

That the Italians did not penetrate deeper into the Sudan was probably attributable to their pusillanimity, which was increased by totally inaccurate information about the strength of the forces opposed to them. When later the Duc d'Aosta was asked why he failed to attack across the Gash river he replied that, in view of the great strength of the Sudanese units, he felt it would be unjustifiable to take so great a risk. Actually these units consisted of one platoon of the Worcestershires and six motor machine-gun companies that might be immobilised after a storm if caught on the wrong surface of desert sand.

It is true that for the first few months after the declaration of war the blinding *haboobs* (dust storms) in the Tokar district rendered military operations difficult and sometimes impossible. It is true also that there was a risk of heavy rains holding up — at any rate for a time — the Italian mechanised transport had they attempted to reach Khartoum or Atbara. But, as it happened, the risk was very slight as the rainfall this year was lighter than usual and did not waterlog the soil.

Perhaps the Italians felt, as did the Germans, that England could not hold out much longer and that it would be a waste of blood and money to fight for a

prize that must soon be theirs without a struggle. They may, too, have felt that to keep open their long lines of communications would have needed more petrol than they could afford, especially after the losses they had sustained from the bombing of the R.A.F. The first of these, on Massowa, had proved so successful that the Italians had moved large quantities of petrol to a hidden dump some miles away; but to no avail. Five Yemenis (inhabitants of the Yemen in Arabia) from Massowa gave such detailed information about the new dump that the R.A.F. was able to destroy this too.

Khartoum and Atbara were of such supreme importance that some risk might have been run in order to capture them. The moral effect of the fall of these two key positions would have been profound throughout the Middle East, and Egypt would have been threatened with invasion from the south at a time when Rommel was advancing from the west. The capture of Atbara would not only have meant the acquisition of the important railway workshops there, but control of the whole railway system to Port Sudan, Kassala and the Egyptian frontier. By the capture of Khartoum the Italians would have commanded the rail routes to the south and west and communications by river along the Blue and White Niles. They would also have gained possession of the rich cotton and grain fields in the Gezira which would have been sufficient to supply them with all the food and cotton they needed.

With such scanty forces at its disposal the Sudan Defence Force could do little more than disguise its

weakness and try to hoodwink the Italians into a misunderstanding of the real situation — a task they accomplished with incredible success. Minor offensives were launched all along the line and the R.A.F., outnumbered by five or ten to one, bombed Italian aerodromes and fuel tanks on the morning after the declaration of war and threw the enemy upon the defensive. Motor machine-gun companies raided behind the enemy lines and, on one memorable occasion, two armoured cars attacked and routed 1200 native cavalry.

Everywhere that a car could go, or a man could scramble, patrols of all kinds harried the Italians, spreading alarm in all directions and encouraging many of the enemy to desert to the British. Each raid brought back information of value. Intelligence agents from the Sudan wandered almost at will in Eritrea, where some Italian subjects often supplied the Sudanese with detailed reports about the movements of convoys and the disposition of troops. And all the time the Italians were kept completely in the dark about the number of troops opposed to them. Their own spies were arrested by loyal Sudanese almost as soon as they made their way into the Sudan. A captured document recorded the bitter comments of an Italian officer, who remarked that he had been quite unable to get any reliable information about what was happening in the Sudan. But there was plenty of information of a sort that was willingly put at his disposal by natives of the country primed to spread false and alarmist rumours. For some time there was nothing between the frontier and the Nile except a few motor machine-gun companies in the neighbourhood of

Kassala. General Platt accordingly sent one company of the West Yorkshire regiment by train to Gedaref to form a reserve for the guarding of the Butana bridge over the Atbara and to protect the Gallabat area. Their orders were to travel about, learn every inch of the country and be seen as well as see. General Platt accompanied the troops and with an escort of one Yorkshire corporal and two privates spent two or three days talking to any native he met and ensuring that he and the other British should be seen by as many people as possible. Rumour exaggerated this little detachment into between four and five thousand men while two Bren carriers were magnified into tanks. When the Fifth Indian division arrived in the country the Italians learnt that five Indian divisions had come to the Sudan.

But the bluffing was not confined to verbal reports. The few motor machine-gun companies were so ubiquitous and elusive that the Italians called them 'The Black Devils' and, in one of their intelligence reports which was captured not long afterwards, a great tribute was paid to their activities. 'These armoured cars', ran the record, 'appear here one day and the next morning they are a hundred miles away. They are always on the move. It is impossible to count them.' It should not have been difficult to count them for they never numbered more than thirty-five; nor were they always on the move as rains, or the possibility of rains, often kept them immobilised. They were too few and too precious to risk being bogged down in an unexpected storm. Yet for six critical months, with only a handful of British officers in com-

mand, they patrolled the long frontier and established a moral superiority over the Italians and prevented them from launching a major attack. During this time invaluable service was rendered by the Hadendowa, who abandoned their customary aloofness when war broke out and, under the title of 'Frosty Force' — a corps of Fuzzy-Wuzzy irregulars — acted as guides without payment, sent spies into Eritrea, and captured twenty-eight enemy agents who had penetrated into the Red Sea hills.

At first it was impossible to introduce any sort of discipline into a crowd of ibex-hunters and other sportsmen who volunteered for all sorts of odd jobs out of sheer love of fighting and loyalty to the British. One of the Fuzzy-Wuzzies, indeed, refused to have anything to do with what some of the regular troops referred to as 'the old army stuff' but which he scornfully rejected as '*liff jai wa jai*' (the wheel coming and coming). But some kind of training was gradually attempted, even though it was frequently interrupted when the recruits began to get bored, and competitions in jumping, mountain racing and games of prisoners' base, had to be arranged to break the monotony of drill.

For part of their failure to appreciate the situation the Italians had to thank their own timid imagination which magnified insignificant patrols into overwhelming forces. At Khor Ashat were fourteen irregulars and thirty unarmed civilian camelmen under Major Lea who gave his name to a unit called Meadow Force. Lea must have been amused to read later a summary in Italian intelligence records to the effect that 'Reports

of the enemy force at Khor Ashat have been greatly exaggerated. It may now be taken as certain that there are not more than two British brigades though they have a number of tanks.' (!)

No better informed was the Italian officer at Khor Yabus who had just finished a report to his commanding officer with the remark, 'I will guarantee that there are no British troops within three kilometres of the Yabus', when a sudden attack killed or captured the officer and his fifty men.

* * *

It was (it must be confessed) a very mixed force that held the frontiers until reinforcements could be sent. Everyone who could be spared from a government office or a commercial firm was enrolled in the fighting services and, after hostilities had actually broken out, these civilians had to learn what they could of musketry, signalling, scouting, demolition work and how to manage a machine-gun or even a wireless-telegraph set. And all this with the enemy only a few miles away. They had to lead into battle against a large and professional army little groups of men who were often as ignorant as they were themselves of military manœuvres. The skill and ingenuity with which they tackled the most unexpected situations were indeed remarkable. It was an amateurish production in which District Commissioners, railway officials, clerks, cotton-growers and many others suddenly found themselves in uniform and cast for unexpected rôles without any preliminary rehearsals. A professor of poetry came from Cairo University to

lead a company of Ethiopian patriots. An anthropologist, at the head of as disorderly a troupe of performers as ever took the stage, put on a variety of unusual but highly successful turns. If they had fluffed their parts who could have blamed them? Indeed, on one occasion a District Commissioner who made his way across the Gash river to carry out some demolition work in Kassala after the Italians had actually entered the town, succeeded in blowing up the post office so effectively that at the same time he blew himself out through the door. And it was only after various encounters with the invaders and considerable difficulties in extricating his car which had stuck in the sandy Gash river that he was able to escape to join his unit.

But their improvisations were just as successful as any lines they might have learnt from military textbooks had they ever owned or studied one. Bimbashi Evans-Pritchard — the anthropologist — never seemed to be happy unless the odds were overwhelmingly against him, and wandered about in enemy territory with one corporal of the civil police and a few Anyuak irregulars — and how irregular a naked Anyuak can be is known only to those who have met him in his stockaded village on the Abyssinian frontier. On one occasion Evans-Pritchard suddenly found himself face to face with a force of between 100 and 150 enemy under the command of two Italian officers and, on being warned that unless he cleared out at once, a fight would ensue, he replied that a fight was what he had come for and meant to have. On another occasion, having been reinforced by a section of police scouts, he

'set off to look for trouble at Pengudo, where he found it most successfully: undaunted by the size of the force against him and using tactics not to be found in military manuals he went in at the charge, dislodged the enemy, killed 17 of them, destroyed his headquarters and carried off 35,000 lire'.

Parker, as has been seen above, held equally unorthodox views, but these amateurs were in good company in their unconventionality. Later, at the battle of Keren, when a company commander summoned up courage to ask General Platt whether it was sound tactics to use the whole of his reserves except three tanks, the General admitted that it was contrary to every text-book that had ever been written, but that at any rate the risk was justified by the result.

Nor were the actors always suitably dressed. The Sudan government had to provide no less than eight different kinds of equipment for the Ethiopian Mission, Free French Forces, King's African Rifles, Indians, Sudanese and others so that there was not much left over for the irregulars who had to make the best of anything they could get hold of. But it was certainly surprising to come across a naked Gummuz (one of the wildest tribes in the Sudan) laboriously despatching, not in cipher, a very secret message. Once when Bimbashi Laurie of the Sudan Political Service, in command of a company of the Camel Corps, was going his rounds in the early morning he found a Nuba complete with rifle, bayonet and ammunition — in fact everything except clothes. 'I am tired', he explained, 'of drying my clothes. I prefer to go about without them as I do at home.'

To the bravery of the Sudanese was added a nonchalance which often caused their officers much anxiety. Once a Hadendowa lay down beside an unexploded bomb as he had been instructed to lie flat in an air raid. All might have been well had he not, out of curiosity, tapped it with a stick and caused it to go off. It blew him into pieces in full view of his small son who had been ordered by his father to move away as he could not be trusted to lie still! On another occasion a Fuzzy-Wuzzy picked up a small bomb which he mistook for a bottle of medicine and, after failing to remove what he thought was the stopper, he tried to knock the head off, which was too much, as Kennedy-Cooke remarked, even for an Italian bomb, and this too exploded.

The Sudanese faced air raids with their usual courage, and when, during a particularly bad attack, the Officer Commanding went to see how his Nubas were getting along, he found them under a tree playing a gramophone.

To most of them war was a lucky dip in which there was always a chance of winning a prize. Once when a force of irregulars organised by Sheikh Abdallah Bakr, and known as Banda Bakr (or Bakr Force), forced their way through four miles of dense scrub to engage the enemy, they were so successful that, though they had started out as infantry, they returned in triumph riding on captured mules. Nothing could restrain their ardour and when, on 10 February 1941, an attack was made on Queissan, sheikhs and other enthusiasts jumped on donkeys or even ran on foot in order to be in at the kill.

For six months Kassala was in the hands of the Italians but, in spite of dangers and privations, the town council, under the leadership of Sayed Mohammed Othman el Mirghani and his brother Sayed el Hasan el Mirghani (nephews of the Sir Sayed El Mirghani who had rendered such loyal services to the British fifty years before) continued to carry on as best they could. At the risk of their lives they helped many people to escape, distributed the grain that had been hidden secretly some time before in anticipation of the fall of Kassala and stood between the victors and their victims. Perhaps no greater tribute can be paid to the loyalty of the Sudanese than the fact that, hard pressed though they were for food, no one betrayed the presence of these hidden stores of grain. Throughout the occupation of Kassala by the Italians these chieftains were responsible for sending intelligence reports of the highest value. One of their agents was an old midwife who had been trained in the Omdurman Midwives' Training School. I like to think of this courageous old lady who risked her life many times to bring news to the British and, as she made her way through the enemy lines, bluffed the Italians into thinking that she was merely going about her usual business.

The Mirghani family and other chieftains played a notable part in preparing the way for the advance into Eritrea and to none of them is greater credit due than to the Nazir of the Hadendowa (Mohammed el Amin Tirik) whose secret agents went everywhere and who, by his personal influence, helped to keep this vital frontier free from invasion, and to persuade the people

to do all in their power to support the British. He was able to prevent the Italians from growing cotton in the area, though only a few miles away it was successfully cultivated by the Sudanese as usual. Their loyalty found strange outlets, but perhaps that which caused the Sudan government authorities the most amusement was the arrival at Aroma of a small boy with the daily readings of the river guage at Kassala! His father, whose duty it was to take these readings, had been ordered to leave, but the boy, thinking it a pity that the job should not be done, had conscientiously taken the readings every day of the Italian occupation.[1]

* * *

By January 1941 all was ready for the great advance. Reinforcements — at first but rivulets making their slow way from Asia, Africa and many distant lands — now united in a torrent which in the Sudan, upon the southern borders of Abyssinia and along the Indian Ocean was to sweep irresistibly onwards and overwhelm the Italian armies, north, south, east and west.

To this day the Sudanese had been eagerly looking forward. The months of waiting had proved irksome to men who, though happy enough when they were actually fighting, were acutely miserable if they were separated for long from their wives and families. The domestic complications that arose in Europe from the absence on active service of a husband or fiancé were not unknown in Africa. From now onwards

[1] B. Kennedy-Cooke, M.C., *Kassala at War*.

the noise of battle died away along the frontiers of the Sudan, though distant echoes of it resounded from the uplands of Eritrea and the mountains of Abyssinia.

As the anxious months wore on, troops began to arrive in distant Kenya to fight under General Cunningham: they came from Northern and Southern Rhodesia, South Africa, Tanganyika, Kenya and Uganda, Australia, Nyasaland, the Gold Coast, Scotland and elsewhere. To the Sudan the Belgian Congo sent an infantry brigade supported by a few guns and a field ambulance, Cyprus two invaluable companies of mules with their muleteers; South Africa contributed a few airmen with Gladiators and six companies of transport with coloured drivers. From French Equatorial Africa came the Chad battalion, detachments of the Foreign Legion and some Spahis; from Palestine a commando company of Jews and Arabs. Four infantry battalions and all the gunners came from England, two battalions of Cameron Highlanders and the Highland Light Infantry from Scotland.

Strange tongues were heard in a strange land of strange peoples. French Spahis and men of the King's African Rifles rubbed shoulders with Arabs from the plains of the Sudan or Nubas from their hilly fastnesses. Short men from the Belgian Congo fought beside tall men from the marshes of the Sudan and met as comrades in arms warriors from the mountains of India. Mahrattas, Garhwalis, Baluchis and Punjabis joined with men of Skinner's Horse and men from the towns and countryside of England and Scotland, differing in

almost everything except in their devotion to a noble cause.

* * *

As it is mainly with the defence of the Sudan that we are here concerned, I shall refer only briefly to the exploits that took the Sudanese, along with other members of the allied forces, through Eritrea and Abyssinia to their crowning triumphs at Amba Alagi and Gondar.

With the arrival of reinforcements the little Sudan Defence Force no longer held the stage alone. It was absorbed in a wider command and shared with others the glory of great victories.

In the extreme south, along the Uganda and Kenya borders, the Equats, commanded by Lieut.-Colonel, afterwards Colonel, Cave, O.B.E., M.C., could do little more than harass the enemy by threats that they had not the numbers to carry out. Fighting 350 miles from their base upon the Nile they had a difficult rôle to play in a hostile country where the unruly tribesmen on both sides of the frontier gave almost as much trouble as the Italians themselves. Elsewhere the Sudan Defence Force had greater scope for displaying the spirit of initiative and enterprise which had distinguished them in the early days of the war. Between the Red Sea littoral and the frontier at Roseires there were two groups of M.M.G. companies, the northern of which became the basis of Gazelle Force — called by this name as its tactics were 'to bound and bounce like a gazelle' — two Mounted Infantry companies of the Western Arab corps, the Composite battalion, the

Frontier battalion and Gideon Force. By the end of 1940 Gazelle Force included also Skinner's Horse and a battery of guns (British) and operated most successfully until it came up against the mountains of Keren, when the units reverted to other and more normal duties.

The Composite battalion was made up of an infantry company of the Eastern Arab Corps, No. 6 (Nuba) company of the Camel Corps, a troop of No. 6 (Mounted Infantry) company of the Western Arab Corps and Bakr Force to which reference has already been made. Although its main function was to guard the frontier, it rendered invaluable service in the general advance by operating far ahead of the main body, making sudden raids upon the enemy's lines of communications, keeping him for ever anxious about the numbers opposed to him and, in particular, by preventing him from bringing up reinforcements when the heights of Keren were being stormed. Gideon Force — so called because its object was to 'smite the enemy hip and thigh' — included some regular and irregular Ethiopian troops and part of the Frontier battalion made up of men from almost every part of the Sudan.

On 18 January 1941 Kassala was abandoned by the Italians a few hours before an attack was to have been made upon it. Everything possible had been done to mislead the enemy as to where the main attack was to have been launched. Many of the troops were held back forty miles away, either in the bed of the Atbara river or in the Gash cotton area, to make a night march to their attacking positions; but

elsewhere there was intense and obvious activity. A short pier was made on the Red Sea coast where it was not wanted; a railway that was not likely to be used was begun from Gedaref to Gallabat; bush was cleared for aerodromes on which no aircraft were to land; roads were hacked through jungle along which no men were meant to move. Dummy tanks and dumps and a dummy hospital were erected to deceive the aeroplanes' prying eyes.

And then the great advance began.

Two separate forces advanced through Kassala and Sabderat to the north, and through Tessenei and Barentu to the south, linking up fourteen days later at Agordat, 150 miles inside the Eritrean frontier, by which time 6000 prisoners had been gathered in as well as 80 guns, 26 tanks and 400 trucks.

This rapid advance was brought to a halt when the heights of Keren were reached — as formidable an obstacle as the British army has ever had to tackle in all its long history. Progress could no longer be measured in miles an hour along level ground but in feet a day up almost unscalable precipices. General Platt's troops had first to advance over a plain two miles broad with no cover except that provided by a few scanty bushes or the bed of a dried stream and then attack, as *The Abyssinian Campaigns* has it, 'a sudden wall of razor ridges rising to 2500 feet, pure rock at the top, and ruled by peaks that in the next two months were to be awarded unforgettable soldiers' names. The enemy had a ponderable artillery, unbreakable natural defences curving around his base at Keren to give interior lines, superb observation for his

guns on to the plain where the British must camp, all the mules that we lacked for supply in mountain warfare — and superior numbers.' From fortified positions, road blocks and hidden crevices in the elaborate defence system, manned by every soldier the Italians could bring into the battle, the enemy could pour an unceasing stream of shells, mortars, bullets and grenades upon the troops laboriously making their way up. Two months' desperate fighting, vividly described in *The Abyssinian Campaigns*, followed until the apparently impossible was achieved and the way lay open to Asmara and Massowa. But set-backs were many when troops were driven by overpowering fire from ridges on which only their indomitable courage had enabled them to set foot. Casualties were very heavy, the Fourth and Fifth Indian divisions losing between 4000 and 5000 men, while every officer, except one, of the 3/18 Garhwal was killed or wounded. 'Foremost in all this fighting in Eritrea', said Winston Churchill in a speech to the House of Commons on 9 April 1941, 'have been our Indian troops, who have at all points and on all occasions sustained the martial reputation of the sons of Hindustan.' But let us not forget the gallantry of the Cameron Highlanders, the West Yorkshires and others who, undaunted by the desperate odds against them, won the desperate fight. Six battalions of infantry from England and Scotland and twelve battalions from India scaled the apparently impregnable massif. It was a joint enterprise in which, although the Indians supplied the sappers, every gunner in the divisional artillery of two divisions came from England. When the battle was over

and Massowa had been captured no less than 40,000 prisoners and 300 guns had fallen to the army of General Platt, and thousands of Italian native levies had deserted the losing cause. Thereafter the army advanced rapidly to the mountain of Amba Alagi, where the Sudanese were to fight their last battle in this part of the front.

Further south, troops from the Sudan had the opportunity of more spectacular service where men from Gideon Force and the Frontier battalion played an important part in opening the way for the Emperor of Abyssinia's return to his capital.

Gideon Force was rightly so named for, although the odds against it were sometimes ten to one, it did smite the enemy hip and thigh in one engagement after another and helped to clear the whole of the Gojjam area of no less than sixteen colonial battalions, two regular Banda groups and four blackshirt battalions with artillery. Half of the total enemy forces were killed or captured and the rest made their way to Gondar to gain a brief respite. Seven mountain guns, 50 heavy and 120 light machine-guns, 300 horses, 700 Italian civil officials, 15,000 mules and vast quantities of equipment, as well as 7000 infantry fell into the hands of 100 men of the Frontier battalion, 60 regular soldiers of the Abyssinian army and 2000 Abyssinian irregulars.

It was an amazing achievement. The Italians, after capitulating, must have been both astounded and humiliated when they had to submit to being disarmed 'under the scowl of three Bren guns which were all that the commander could spare for the operation' — feelings probably shared by another Italian leader

who was induced to surrender the fort of Mota — garrisoned by 400 men — to a lieutenant dressed up as a major who then made a triumphant entry at the head of two platoons of men. Throughout this campaign the Sudan Defence Force, although outnumbered by men, guns and the mechanical equipment of war played a gallant part. Three hundred Sudanese of the Frontier battalion, commanded by Lieut.-Colonel, afterwards Colonel, Boustead, D.S.O., O.B.E., M.C., bore the brunt of the fighting at Debra Markos, where they contained 12,000 of the enemy, well supplied with artillery and machine-guns and who were strongly entrenched in the mountain heights. By harassing the enemy night after night, attacking one post after another with the bayonet and a few hand grenades, the Sudanese compelled the Italians to give up their prepared positions.

Nor was this the last triumph in which the Sudanese were to share, for they took part in the final reduction of Gondar. Here 11,500 Italians and 12,000 Africans surrendered to a force far inferior in numbers, who also gathered in 400 machine-guns, 24 mortars and 48 field guns of various calibres.

These great victories had been won at a cost of only 116 killed and 386 wounded, apart from the losses incurred by the Abyssinian patriots, and the road was now open to Addis Ababa.

* * *

For many months the Emperor, Haile Selassie, had been living incognito in Khartoum in what was referred to as the Pink Palace. On 21 January he crossed

the frontier on horseback into Abyssinia and completed his 500-mile journey to his capital on 5 May — the fifth anniversary of the Italians' entry into it.

His way had been prepared for him by Colonel (afterwards Brigadier) Sandford who was the leader of what, for security reasons, was known as Mission 101. It was not an imposing Mission, consisting merely of Sandford, Captain Critchley of the 12th Lancers, a medical officer, two British N.C.O.s and about a hundred Abyssinian refugees, but it was led by a superb commander. Sandford, cheerful, indomitable, with hair on almost every part of his body except the top of his head, had won a D.S.O. and bar in the First World War, served for a time in the Sudan Political Service and spent fifteen years of his life in Abyssinia. Here, accompanied by his courageous wife, he had had a hard struggle to earn enough money even for the most urgent needs of his large family, whether by writing articles for *The Times* and *Daily Telegraph*, growing strawberries and plums on a farm overhanging the Blue Nile or selling jam in Addis Ababa.[1] He had won the sympathy of many of the Abyssinian chieftains and was aware of the quarrels and intrigues that made it so difficult for them to combine against the Italians. The Mission crossed the frontier in the middle of August 1940 when the rains had set in and travelling could hardly have been more arduous or life more miserable. For many months the Mission wandered about in the Gojjam area distributing the Emperor's leaflets, arranging plans for the arrival of troops and the distribution of arms to the

[1] G. L. Steer, *Sealed and Delivered*, p. 25.

patriots and persuading the chieftains to welcome the Emperor and fight on his behalf. Hunted unceasingly by the Italians and searched for by Italian aircraft, Sandford more than once barely escaped with his life.

It was a fitting tribute to Sandford, the Sudanese and the 2nd Ethiopian battalion that, when the Emperor made his triumphant entry into Addis Ababa, the 2nd Ethiopian battalion marched just in front of his car, the Frontier battalion just behind, while another car bore 'the bald head of the leader of Mission 101'.[1]

* * *

If the tasks undertaken by the Sudanese and their allies were various they had at any rate this in common — the extravagance of the odds against success in which Nature conspired with man to make success apparently impossible.

Freezing in a blizzard on top of a 14,000-foot-high mountain, and suffering from mountain sickness, sweltering in mosquito-infested swamps, clambering up almost insurmountable escarpments in the face of converging machine-gun fire, laboriously hauling guns and trucks slung on bamboo poles up cliffs where it was difficult to find a foot-hold, groping for an unseen enemy in grass eight feet high and strewn with mines, hacking a way through dense thickets, floundering through rivers or flooded streams where those who could not swim clung to the tails of camels in order to be dragged across, sometimes hungry, often thirsty, sweating in the stifling heat or chilled to the bone by a tropical storm, the men fought on, cheerfully tackling

[1] *The Abyssinian Campaigns*, p. 67.

the strange mechanical devices of modern war that were so utterly alien to the quiet pastoral life to which most of them were accustomed. Minefields, road blocks, wire entanglements linking one precipice with another, all had to be circumvented or overcome. Mechanical transport crashed on the boulders which barred their path, stuck in a sandy water-course or were bogged after a sudden downpour. Food, ammunition and all the implements of war had to be carried for miles by weary men, or borne on mules or camels whose numbers dwindled rapidly under the rigours of the campaign. Out of 17,500 camels that started with the Emperor on his return to his capital barely half survived the hazards of the journey or the attacks of 'fly'.

So great were the difficulties of transport that often a third of the fighting troops had to be employed for long distances in manhandling the stores and ammunition. The number of men available for fighting gradually decreased owing to guards having to be found for the thousands of prisoners they captured and to protect them against the fury of the Abyssinians. It is to the enduring credit of the Abyssinians that, in spite of the brutal treatment they had received at the hands of the Italians there was not, so far as we know, one single incident of retaliation by the Abyssinians on any Italian man, woman or child. After the conquest of Abyssinia General Platt was Commander-in-Chief of East Africa with a command that stretched to the Zambesi river, and was in charge of all the prisoners-of-war camps in Kenya and elsewhere. Never once did he hear of any story of revenge.

The Fighting Sudanese

The inquisitive student of history may look in vain upon the map for the names of places where gallant deeds were done and glorious victories gained. Keren, Chilga (where three companies of the Composite battalion accounted for 1000 of the enemy in two and a half days' fighting), Debra Markos, Amba Alagi and Gondar will for ever recall imperishable memories of courage and endurance in which the Sudanese played a grand, though now no longer a major, part. Individuals will recount for many years to come the storming of the heights of Keren by the British and their Indian allies, the long, laborious marches to attack in their fortified positions an enemy overwhelmingly superior in men, guns and all the machinery of war, the arduous struggle against the malice of man and the malignity of nature.

But though the Sudanese fought with the greatest distinction in Abyssinia and later served with the 8th Army — patrolling the deserts of southern Libya, garrisoning towns in Cyrenaica and Tripolitania and guarding the lines of communications in occupied enemy territory — their finest hour was over when the great advance began. For over three months until the Fifth Indian division arrived from India, the Sudanese, inadequately armed and often outnumbered by more than ten to one, had held 1200 miles of frontier against the onslaught of tanks, men, aircraft and mechanised artillery. Generals and regular officers now passed across a stage where so short a time before Majors, Captains and civilians in uniform had played the leading rôles; and with no doubtful success.

Strange little groups of men, which, under the title

of Meadow Force, Demissi Force, Frosty Force, Ker Force, Bakr Force, Gazelle Force and Gideon Force, had striven so valiantly and triumphed so gloriously disappeared into the mountains and the plains from which they had come and went back to their cattle, their cultivation and their hunting, proud in the knowledge that they had fought a great fight and won a great victory. How great they probably did not realise at the time and many may not yet have realised. But had the Sudan been lost, the way to the East would have lain wide open to the Axis powers and the war might have been devastatingly prolonged.

Seldom can so many diverse elements have been compounded into so harmonious a whole. It was a Commonwealth of Nations that fought in the Sudan and East Africa for the freedom of mankind. Africans, Asiatics, Europeans and men of the British Commonwealth — armed partly from the western hemisphere and fed partly from the Antipodes — united in a common enterprise and celebrated a common victory. When General Wetherall's message of congratulation after the fall of Gondar was issued to the troops it had to be read out in no less than ten different languages. His congratulations had been well earned. An allied force that never exceeded 70,000 men had put out of action far more than that number of the enemy, with astonishingly small losses to themselves. Tens of thousands of native levies deserted from the Italians as the war went against them. The Italians had been driven out of the whole of Eritrea and northern and western Abyssinia almost as far as Addis Ababa.

The difficulties, dangers and discomforts which the troops had endured must have seemed well worthwhile when they gazed upon the gathering of the booty and the almost unending stream of prisoners who filed before them. And to none can the spectacle have been more satisfying than to the Fourth Indian division which, fresh from its triumphs in the sands of the western desert in Egypt, had been hurriedly transferred south to storm the heights of Keren.

History may perhaps acclaim Keren as one of the decisive battles in the Second World War. Any delay in destroying the Italian armies in East Africa would have held up men and materials urgently needed for the defence of Egypt. That these were available for service in other fields was due to the courage and enterprise of General Platt who, in spite of the doubts of some members of his staff, decided to attack an apparently impregnable massif. His crowning triumph was a just reward for his arduous months of preparation. He was not only conducting a major campaign — the first permanently successful one of the war — but he was responsible for all the military dispositions in the Sudan and the civil problems these involved. Frequently he had to fly from the battle-front to Khartoum to tackle these difficulties as they arose. But his ultimate success might never have been achieved but for his imaginative insight into the part that motor machine-gun companies might play if war broke out. He had been responsible for the training and organisation of these companies before the beginning of hostilities and, though they played a relatively minor part in the later stages of

the campaign, they had played the leading part in the early days. If they contributed little to the successful advance into Eritrea and Abyssinia, they contributed everything to the successful defence of the Sudan. A victorious offensive action would hardly have been possible but for their victorious defensive action. It is gratifying to reflect that the value of what they did was not forgotten. What finer memorial to the dead, or nobler inspiration to the living, can there be than the praise given to the Sudanese in the official report of the Abyssinian Campaigns?

'If the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan had gone, the supply lines to the Middle East up the Red Sea and across Africa from Takoradi to Khartoum would have gone too. Egypt itself would have become untenable. There could have been, in fact, no front in the Middle East. . . . Major-General Platt and his men succeeded in bluffing the Italians into thinking our forces were far stronger than in fact they were. This difficult and vital task fell mainly upon the motor machine-gun companies — incidentally a purely Sudanese force with only two British officers to each company. They deserve in the Battle of Africa the same tribute as the Prime Minister paid to the fighter pilots of the R.A.F. in the Battle of Britain: for rarely has "so much been owed by so many to so few".'

THE END

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THE ANGLO-EGYPTIAN SUDAN

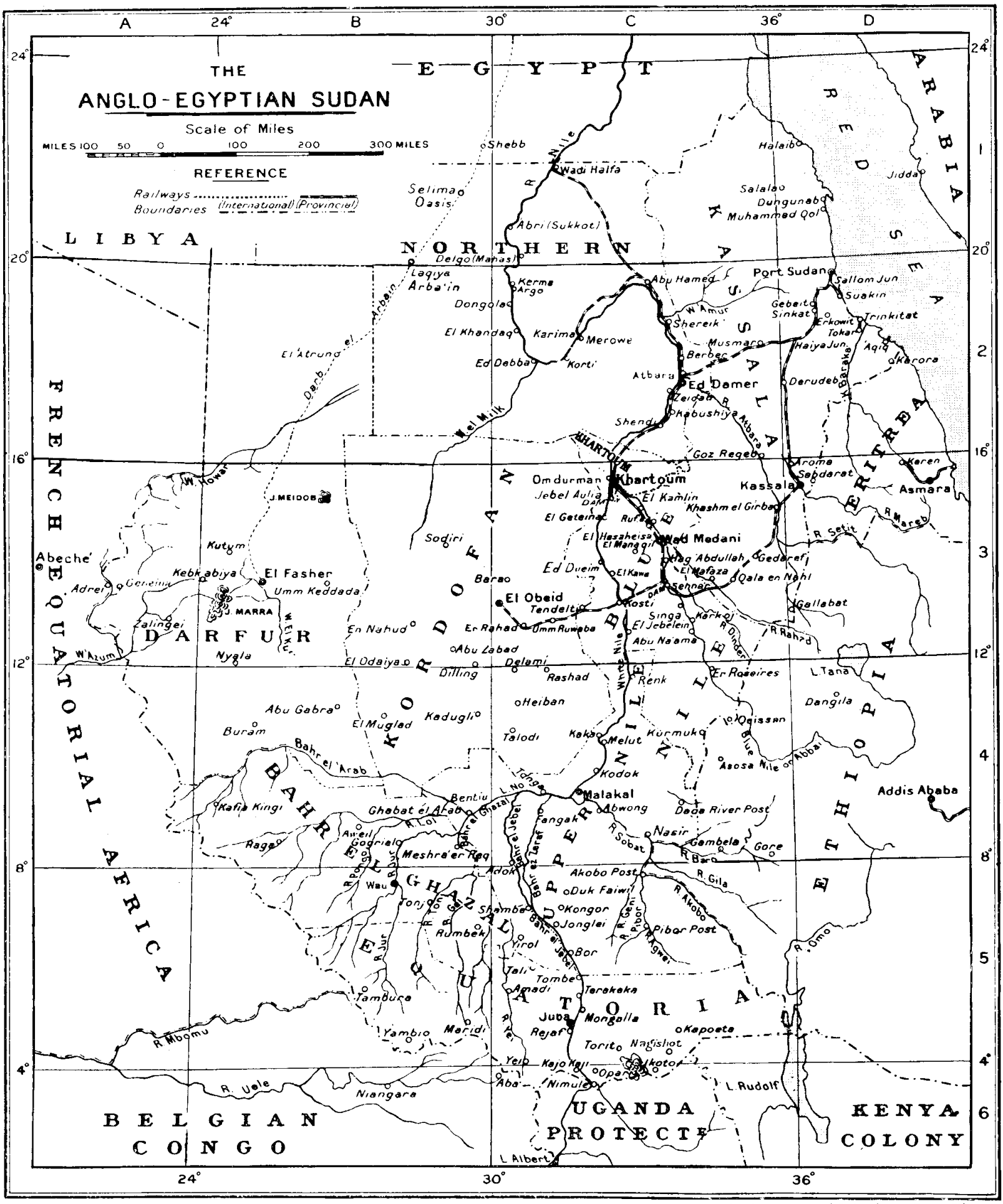
Scale of Miles

MILES 100 50 0 100 200 300 MILES

REFERENCE

Railways .....

Boundaries (International) (Provincial)



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